



# SACRED GATES

BRINGING MINDFULNESS TO PRISONS

A VOLUNTEER'S GUIDE

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Yoga poses artwork for this booklet by Rick Morgan and drawings by those incarcerated  
courtesy of the Human Kindness Foundation

Dedicated to all the teachers and students who have helped me grow  
and to the Human Kindness Foundation  
and its dedication to dignity and sacred potential within all people.

# Entering the Sacred Gates

## Crossing the Threshold

Volunteering in prison has been one of the most rewarding commitments of my life. What started perhaps as a noble quest to help save wretched souls turned into a revelation of the resilience of the human spirit. I've been inspired by men on whom most of the world has turned its back, opening themselves to each other and to me. They have made real the phrase "there but for the grace of God go I" and "there *with* the grace of God go I." I've learned how no matter the depth of bottom, we can rebound and reclaim our best self and face karma with dignity and humor. If I could be the person all the time that I feel I have been inspired to be some of the time behind those paradoxically sacred prison gates, I might save a few thousand incarnations to enlightenment.

Whenever I tell my story of volunteering in prison to people who have little or no experience of that world, the reaction is invariably one of amazement and puzzlement. Why would you want to do that?

Each of us drawn to this work has his or her own answer. For me, it began after a men's retreat in the desert Southwest. Initiated on the path to being elders, we each consciously made a commitment to find some way to help our fellow men. Soon after, an older man I admired told me about his volunteer work in a nearby prison. As someone who had spent much of my life carefully protecting my public image I could not think of anything more frightening. My family motto was "Succeed or Die in Shame." It was time to burn the family crest. I swallowed hard and asked my friend how I might become involved.

After the introduction to prison program staff and the requisite short training and background check, I began helping individual inmates with reading and writing skills, eventually becoming sponsor for a unit newspaper. Along the way I earned the right to take some prisoners out on passes, usually to local restaurants, movies and events. It was part of an effort to acclimate these men who might be released to a world many had little exposure to for years. Although I was volunteering at a minimum-security prison, that did not mean that only petty crimes were represented. I became close to men who had dealt drugs, committed armed robberies, as well as murders. Some of these men showed signs of being deeply institutionalized. Others were as yet unwilling to move beyond the con games they played on the world but mostly played on themselves. Yet many I came to know proved the promise of rehabilitation.

Before and during this time I discovered and practiced both yoga and meditation. I remember relating my experiences from both to one of the inmates. The next time we met, he and a friend pulled me aside and asked if I would share what I was learning with them. How I went from that simple request to leading yoga and meditation in prison for almost a decade is the subject of this guide.

If you are reading this, you are drawn to this work in some way. My humble hope is that my experiences can inform and empower you in creating your own prison program. My advice will be just one

contribution among many resources you can draw on. What I have written is based on my experiences, at a men's prison, which may or may not be fully applicable to the situation or institution you are involved with. In the end, just as in meditation and yoga, we must all become our own best teachers.

### **Are You Good Enough?**

Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the pioneers of mindfulness-based stress reduction in the U.S., has remarked on the challenge of presuming to teach meditation when we know too well the limitations of our own attainment. Who are we to proclaim ourselves gurus, whether of yoga or meditation or especially both? In my case, while I had studied with some learned teachers for years in both areas, I had no special certifications or blessings to teach. Who was I to take on leading prisoners in either practice? Even if you are "certified" in some capacity, chances are you've never tested that knowledge within the context of a prison.

I asked myself whether I was good enough many times over. By fortune and grace, I discovered I was very close by to a group with deep experience in prison work, the Human Kindness Foundation. From inmates I had learned of the works of Bo Lozoff, founder of the Prison-Ashram Project and the foundation that supports the project. I devoured Bo's books, from *Lineage*, a collection of powerful short stories, to *We're All Doing Time*, the groundbreaking guide for inmates seeking to turn prison into a path of self-realization (yes, including instructions on yoga and meditation). I screwed up the courage and reached out to Bo to ask his guidance in responding to the request to lead yoga and meditation in the prison. Responding to my perhaps long-winded and overly earnest letter, I got a call from Sita Lozoff, Bo's wife and partner in the foundation's work. In a gentle and affirming voice, she said my familiarity with yoga and meditation seemed sufficient and that most importantly I seemed to have the right intentions to pursue the request. She and Bo knew the local warden and would support me as they could. In short, she told me to "just go do it." My bluff had been called, and I was both delighted and terrified.

As Kabat-Zinn says, "It is 'good enough' *for now* if you know you don't really know what you are doing but somehow find a way to be real ... if you keep in mind at all times that life is the real meditation teacher, and life is the real meditation practice. ... Then you just might make a very big and beneficial difference in some people's lives, and in your own."<sup>\*</sup>

### **Pleading Your Case**

As daunting as it can seem to convince yourself this is something you can do, that may pale in comparison to convincing the prison management, not just of your qualifications but of the need and benefit of the program. Yet thanks to the many meditation-based groups and individuals who for decades

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<sup>\*</sup> "Foreword," *Teaching Mindfulness: A Practical Guide for Clinicians and Educators* (p. xxii) - 2011. See Resources section at the end for more complete description.

have worked in prisons with inmates, there is often more understanding and recognition of the value of mindfulness programs than you might expect.

There are at least two conditions that seem necessary to overcoming what should be understandable barriers in a prison setting.

First, there needs to be an openness within prison leaders to programs that benefit inmates in one or more ways. If the prison you are hoping to volunteer at has a wide range of program offerings already, your chances of adding an additional one may be greater, though you may have to wait for an opening. It will be important to discover who drives the programming within the unit, whether a chaplain, a program officer, a psychologist, or the warden. Then you will need to tailor your proposal to the culture and rules. If the institutional culture limits inmate opportunities for personal development, a mindfulness program is likely to be a harder sell. Still, I hope that materials in this guide will help you make the case that there are sound reasons for administrators to embrace yoga and meditation for the well being of all in the unit.

Second, the situation requires a sense of trust in you and a rapport with the administrator(s). That sense may be established quickly or come only after months or years of interaction. Prison administrators face a complex array of pressures from within the unit, from the community, and from the hierarchy above them. Your patience and understanding of their challenges will go a long way toward making a long-term mindfulness program a reality. Imbue everything you do with an attitude of service. Join in any community programs that you can at the start; show your dedication to the inmates, the staff, and the unit as a whole. Be skillful in when and how you ask, and react as positively as you can to being turned down or put on hold.

In my case, I had been a volunteer for five years before asking the warden for permission to begin a yoga/meditation class. I was known to staff and some inmates, had received a volunteer award, and was lucky enough to be at a unit with a broad programming mix and an open warden (see his letter pg. 7).

Here is a slightly condensed version of the letter I sent to the warden after speaking to him briefly at a community meeting and asking permission to send him a proposal:

Dear Warden,

As we discussed briefly tonight, I would like to begin offering, in addition to my other volunteer commitments, a class on simple meditation. I believe at least two inmates would be participants right away and might bring along a few more. We would use the library (or other space as staff deem) and take about an hour once per week. I would hope the unit would find a way to support inmates' personal meditation efforts between my visits. I'm not sure what that would require, but I hope you'll give me some guidelines to offer to participants for where and when they might be able to find personal space for that.

My background: I am by no means a guru or yogi. I have personally, with much instruction and help, pursued my own path of yoga and meditation in various forms for the past decade. My yoga work has

spanned that full time; my meditation practice for about half that, with more intense efforts over the last year. So I would be in many ways growing in practice with the inmates. Coming from a Christian background, I've found wisdom in all major faiths and have increasingly gone deeper into Buddhist practice. I will be developing more contact with Bo and Sita Lozoff in the coming months for further guidance.

The Class: The underlying goals are very simple: to encourage interested inmates to settle their minds, become more present with themselves and their situations, and to feel and exhibit greater appreciation for themselves and others. The class will be suitable for anyone. It requires no particular faith system. Those already committed to one religious system or another may find their connections to that faith deepened. Those without any particular beliefs may find their own way to spirituality. But if all one finds is greater clarity and calm, that is fine. I have no proselytizing to offer here.

Format: The format will be equally simple. I would like to use the library space to begin with. I will bring some blankets and pillows. It should take about one hour per week.

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|------|--|------------|
| I.   | <i>Introduction</i><br>I will share some thoughts on the practical aspects of meditation, its effects, or a brief reading to set the tone for the gathering.   | 10 minutes |
| II.  | <i>Yoga Stretches</i><br>Standing, sitting, or using chairs, we will do some simple hip-opening postures, other stretches, and calming breathing to prepare for the seated meditation. We will then move into seated meditation postures, making sure that all find a comfortable approach suited to their body and flexibility. | 15 minutes |
| III. | <i>Seated Meditation</i><br>Silent meditation will take 20 minutes (timed by me), either with closed eyes or partially open eyes, depending on individual preference and comfort.  | 20 minutes |
| IV.  | <i>Focus of Compassion</i><br>Still in the meditative posture, I will guide the participants in a visualization aimed at feeling compassion first for themselves, then for loved ones, others they know, may have had difficulties with, or aren't even aware of.  | 5 minutes  |
| V.   | <i>Closing Questions/Sharing Experiences</i><br>For those with questions about their experiences, I will answer what I can or leave open to contemplation what I can't. Anyone desiring to share his experiences may. No one will be required to say anything. We will depart in quiet after a final short thought or quote.     | 10 minutes |

Please let me know what else I might need to do and when I can begin scheduling the class. As always, thanks so much for your openness. The inmates may not always appreciate the fact, but they are lucky to have you there.

Sincerely,  
Chris Canfield

It took about three months after sending this letter for the warden to coordinate with his program staff, for them to contact me, and for me to get set up to begin teaching. How you approach the administrators will depend on the particular situation and relationships, but being clear on your background (with its limitations), goals, the structure of a class, and your respect for the rules of the institution will help in any event.



## *View From Inside the Gates*

**To Prison Administrators:**

**I was the Superintendent of Orange Correctional Center (OCC) for twenty years until my retirement at the end of 2008. OCC is a rather small minimum custody unit that is well integrated into the North Carolina community where it is located. It has always been known to focus on program activities aimed at getting offenders to be more responsible and aware of how their actions have certain consequences.**

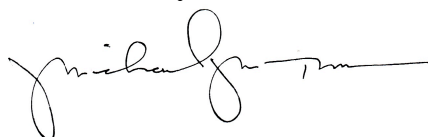
**A volunteer who had served in a variety of ways over the years came to me one day with a written request to conduct a class in meditation and yoga. I was familiar with the potential positive benefits of such practice and, while unsure how it would be received by the general population, agreed to give it a try. The first hurdle was already cleared by having a presenter who was well regarded and trusted by staff and inmates alike.**

**The class was never really a large group, but it was regularly attended mostly by men who seriously wanted to make a change in their lives. While the participants may have been ribbed initially for going to the class, it was generally accepted after a brief period. I can say without reservation that the regulars were a positive/productive influence on other sections of the population.**

**As any administrator knows, sometimes the greatest challenge in getting something to work effectively is getting staff to buy in. There were some initial challenges due to this being one more thing to manage and because it was something “different.” But acceptance came quickly as it didn't turn out to be too time consuming for programs and was not hard for custody to accommodate. They also noted the positive effect on the population.**

**Similar to other program offerings, it all depends on what you put into it as to what you will receive from it. This class had all the key essentials: a dedicated, reliable instructor; a good format with flexibility; and participants willing and wanting to learn. I know that some lives were changed for the better because of this class. I hope that, if given the opportunity, you will give it a try.**

**Sincerely,**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael M. Thumm". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

**Michael M. Thumm  
Superintendent (Ret.)**



## Ready, Set

Besides being mentally and spiritually ready for the role you will play in the prison, you must also be physically ready. I'm not talking about the depth you can hold yoga poses or the duration you can sit meditation without squirming. I'm talking about becoming ready in even more practical terms.

How do you get in to even start a class? It is probably worth an advance visit, figuring out how you would need to come into the prison each week, with whom would you sign in, what inspections you would go through, and who would unlock the room. You'd also want to understand the ways inmates are communicated to for letting them know the class is beginning. It might be a loudspeaker system or just a posting of schedules with notice in some other ways.

Who is going to show up? In most cases, your class will be voluntary. Word of mouth will reach a number of like-minded inmates, but there may be other ways to advertise the offering that the program staff can suggest. In some cases, inmates will have to sign up specially and be cleared to take the class. What makes for a "successful" class in prison may not be the same as on the outside. You can certainly work on gimmicks or giveaways (such as food, within the rules of the prison) to entice people to come. But I found that I'd rather have a smaller group of people motivated to practice than a crowd looking for a distraction to break the boredom. But do make the class welcoming, even to those who may be skeptical or just curious. In the end, some are ready, others are not, and whatever people's choices, we should avoid taking it personally.

How can you best make the space available work for your class? Figure out how you would move furniture (with permission) if needed to make space, and would you be able to sweep it before/after as needed. Where is the equipment to do that? How many people could you accommodate and in what arrangement? What limitation are there on things like candles? On music systems?

Even more basic, what will you be able to use for the yoga and meditation? Those of us on the outside are often spoiled at studios by many different kinds of music, mats, straps, blocks, pillows, bolsters, and other aids. Going into prison reminds us how little is really needed to accomplish the same results. In the early days, I started simply, with a bag of Mexican blankets I'd bought cheaply at a roadside market and some pillows from a remainder store. I lugged them to the gate each week, then to the room, and after moving tables and chairs out of the way, made a serviceable circle to handle the 2-10 people I might get.

Over time, as I saw that the class would be able to continue, I invested in some yoga mats bought online as factory seconds. Then I made blocks from larger pieces of whitewater canoeing foam that was easy to saw into shape. A fun array of gaudy and outdated 50-cent ties from a local thrift store (and some from my closet) became straps (and objects of many jokes, especially for new students). All got strategically crammed into large equipment duffles from the sports store. I literally waddled to the gate with it all by

the time I was fully engaged in the program. Inmates would usually anticipate my coming and get permission to help me carry the bags from the gate to the room. But at times it gave the guards headaches going through searches of the equipment. So be respectful of the realities at the unit. Is there a way to store some portion of the equipment onsite? And if severely limited in what you can bring in or use, remember that we truly need nothing but a floor or chair and a willing body to practice both yoga and meditation.

Whatever arrangement you think you have set up – from the location allotted to your class, to the time slot, to the permission for inmates to even come – assume it will change, periodically and for reasons that may make little sense to you. Prisons often run on what seem to be two contradictory impulses: absolute adherence to rules and unrelenting unpredictability. Sometimes changes are made to enhance security by breaking routines, other times due to new orders from above, or just because a different corrections officer was put in charge of the shift. A famed Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, was well-known for driving his students to learn and follow very detailed schedules and rules of behavior, then randomly changing them. The chance to learn the same simultaneous discipline and flexibility instilled by such practices will be yours in prison work. And remember, if the inmates have to stay centered in the context of such lack of control, so must we as teachers. Making the best of whatever frustrating reality we face is key.

# Making Your Offering

## The First Class Experience

Preparing to make real the intention you have had for so long will challenge all the realization you have hoped was there. It will be necessary to practice what you intend to preach -- offering yourself authentically to the experience, assuredly presenting what you know, and admitting what you don't. In truth, every person coming to the class will have his or her own anxieties, too. It is important to establish up front that this is a shared exploration for all, including you. Taking yourself and the program lightly will go a long way toward breaking through the tensions for everyone.

On my unit, there are a number of standing jokes that never seem to get old. The loudspeaker announcement for "meditation class" will invariably get someone yelling back at me "did he say *medication* class? If so, I'm there, man." I sometimes joke back that it is even better than any medication and if he joined in tonight we might even do the lesson on levitation.

The structure outlined above in my letter to the warden provides a rhythm for a class that you may find useful.

## *Introduction*

A typical class introduction for me is, depending on how many new students are in the class, something like: "Welcome to yoga and meditation class. For those of you who are new, and as a reminder to those of us who have been here before, this is really an opportunity for you to check in with yourself. I will be leading you through a series of yoga poses and then a period of seated meditation. It doesn't take any special skills, talents, or knowledge to do either. The simplest goal is for you to feel more connected. Connected to your body, your breath, your emotions, and, if you desire, your spirituality. Perhaps also connected to each other and the world around us.

"So why do we connect yoga and meditation? Well, the first reason may be so we can all have a good laugh before we sit down to meditate. Really, it is important not to get so solemn or rigid about the meditation part. But for me, and for many men, it can be easy to escape into the head, leaving the body and emotions behind. If you were attracted to meditation because you thought it would be an escape from yourself and life, that you are going to float off into some disembodied Nirvana, I'm going to disappoint you. Meditation is mostly about just the opposite -- becoming very aware and very present in your body, in your mind, whatever it's playing at, and your emotions. If you've spent your life trying to avoid all that, through addictions or distractions, this is part of the antidote. So we do yoga not just so we can sit for twenty minutes with less discomfort because we've stretched but also so we are better able to inhabit our bodies and ourselves as they are now and meditate as a whole person."

I found in the early days that I would go on longer about the practices, attempting to explain nuances and anticipate questions and head off misconceptions. But over time I realized that much of what I said was difficult to follow for those who had no experience to use as a reference. Let the experience speak for itself first, with all the confusions, frustrations, and insights a less tutored practice might allow. Perhaps use the introduction to talk about some special theme, such as anger, or not believing everything the mind tells us, or self-compassion. If appropriate, add in a salient quote from a poet or religious leader or philosopher. Then structure the yoga (or the commentary during the yoga) and the meditation to support exploration of the theme for the class.

Mostly, though, go with the flow, ready to leave behind whatever nicely packaged theme you have constructed for the reality in front of you. I remember one night when a regular inmate came in saying he didn't know if he could stay. He had just found out his grandmother, the person who had raised him and essentially his only stable parent, had just died. I immediately abandoned whatever script I had written in my head for the evening. I asked him if there might be some comfort in staying for the class. With his permission and that of the rest of the class, we focused that night on death, both acceptance of it and sending blessings to all those facing death and the loss caused by death. It was one of the more powerful sessions we all shared, thanks to the openness of the inmate to share his grief and be supported by the rest of the group.

### *Yoga Stretches*

The yoga part of a class can be as simple or extensive as your training and the willingness and ability of the students allow. One common reality in men's prisons is that, while many of the inmates are in good muscular condition, usually from lifting weights, most struggle with flexibility and the special kind of endurance yoga requires and builds. Many also have injuries from hard lives either on the streets or from being in prison. But the greatest common reality is that a room full of men will compete with and goad one another. That can be energizing and fun. It can also be risky.

It is worth going slow and keeping realistic expectations about what positions and depth of poses are possible. If you lack the Gumby composition of some yoga teachers, struggling with things like hamstrings, as I do, use that to relate to the struggles of students, admitting your own limitations. For me yoga is in part about becoming attuned to one's individual capacities and accepting those. It is less about the Sanskrit names and perfect forms and more about what each pose and our reactions to it can teach us about being mindful.

Do you grumble about certain poses? Why? What is the resistance to doing them? Is it your lack of mastery? What is your body telling you? Your mind? Are there emotions that come up in the position?

I had one class member who was unable to stay long in the supposedly restful child's pose. I asked if his knees or ankles were uncomfortable. After a few moments, he shared that he had been handcuffed in that position and left for an extended period in jail that way and had all sorts of emotions triggered by it.

What makes you so comfortable in your favorite postures? Does your ego swell? Do you judge others who can't do it so easily? Or do you just find yourself breathing easier and enjoying the full energy of your body?

I recall one of the younger participants who had a gymnast's body. He could flop over while standing with hands flat on the floor then pop up into a handstand and walk. Everyone admired his natural ease. And he enjoyed the audience. It was the meditation that challenged him. Eyes closed for twenty minutes was more difficult for him than holding one-legged royal pigeon pose for two minutes. We each have our unique strengths and challenges.

Yoga brings us into full body and breath awareness and helps us examine the play of the mind in stressful situations, even if it is just reverse triangle. It should also teach us the difference between tolerating discomfort and causing ourselves real pain. So many have little awareness of the boundaries between the two. It is sadly common for me to hear "you hurt me in that yoga class last week." No matter how many times I say, "listen to your body" or "don't do what you see my or someone else's body doing, do what your body wants to do" there is always someone trying to push the limits. I have learned that this can be habitual among people who spend most of their day trying not to feel the body or reality they live in. Driven by anger and shame, some can also push too far as a sort of self punishment.

One of the antidotes is humor. My slogan "I can't hurt you; only you can hurt yourself" became so often repeated that the regulars began chiming in with me. Poking fun at ourselves and our limitations in yoga poses also helps deflate the tensions among us all. In a men's unit, some of the humor is going to be pretty earthy. It is "guy yoga" of a sort you'll likely never experience in another yoga class. And that can be refreshing.

An additional note: If you are comfortable doing hands-on adjustments during most yoga classes, you may find the inmates are not comfortable receiving them, and there may be rules specific to touch on the unit. Touch of any kind in vulnerable situations can be triggering. I rarely offer adjustments. In prison and with inmates, I also have a rule not to offer hugs. I always accept them, though. You'll just have to read the situation carefully and learn the rules.

### *Seated Meditation*

Sitting quietly and just breathing for twenty minutes would seem to be just about the easiest thing anyone could do. And as all of us who do it know, it is, and it is not. So I generally remind students that we call it a meditation "practice" for a reason. Every time we sit to meditate we are pretty much guaranteed to fail at whatever goal we've set. It is a lifetime of learning how to deal with failure in a calm

way. That lesson alone is worth the effort. For inmates who are steeped in failures, and judgments from all sides for them, this is a great gift, especially when we confess we share the same failures in meditation ourselves.

Just as in the yoga section, the depth and variety of meditation practices you chose to bring to the students will depend on your own experiences and inclinations. Prison fosters many conversions, so inmates will come in with many forms of faith or a severe lack of faith. Meditation is, and should be presented as, available to all, with no inherent conflict with whatever one chooses to worship or chooses not to worship. I made a conscious choice to explore different forms of meditation from different traditions and share them with students, at least at the very basic levels. I make no claim of having mastered them; rather I share the explorations with the inmates. My other goal is to show how widespread the contemplative tradition is, from centering prayer in Christianity, to moving meditations of Sufism, from the various versions of practice within Buddhism, to the more recent translations to the secular world of mental and physical health. Whatever version I offer, I make sure it is just that -- an offering. What students want to do with the 20 minutes is up to them. If they want to calculate the days until they get out, have a dialogue with Jesus, or fantasize about a woman the whole time and totally ignore me, I never really know, nor am I especially concerned. The silence has a way of doing its work no matter what, if practiced over and over.

While the forays into different forms are interesting experiments, it is going to be most useful to return again and again to a basic mindfulness practice of focus on the breath or scanning the body. Near the end of the meditation period, I usually ask them to participate in a visualization of sharing their peace and energy with others (as outlined in Lozoff's *We're All Doing Time*). Here they can imagine a light of good energy starting inside their own bodies, wishing kindness for themselves, then spreading out to touch all those in the class, expanding to the whole prison, the state, the world, and even the universe. Whether or not such an energy exchange really happens in some scientific sense is less important than the attitudes it grooves in the meditator, I gladly explain. Other themes for classes engender different visualizations, such as a simple version of tonglen (summarized in the outline above - see Pema Chodren and other sources for more complete explanations).

Over the years, I have become convinced that more people fail to return to class because of what they face in meditation than because of the challenges of yoga. Think about what images and feelings await many of the inmates in the darkness of their inner selves. You will need to respect what it takes to even begin to open up to those thoughts and give participants plenty of space to claim them and make whatever peace they can. And while it is crucial to offer a safe space for personal exploration, never lose sight of the fact that these individuals are incarcerated, in a situation where they have very little control of their surroundings, and where signs of vulnerability can be perceived as weakness. I've certainly had the experience of glancing up during meditation and seeing tears coming down an inmate's cheeks. But I would never make it a topic for discussion unless the inmate initiated it.

Some inmates display signs of real mental and emotional difficulties. I remember a few who stopped in showing a certain incoherence or subtle hostility or dissociative quality. I was always ready to suggest that perhaps the class wasn't well suited to them. But through some strange grace I've never had to. Those who I felt might be too unsettled by the class somehow always chose themselves not to come back.

You may already be asking whether you are equipped to handle everything that might come up for some of the participants. For me, the simple answer is "no." Be aware of your limitations. Know what resources are available on the unit and how you'd access them should someone ask for counseling you can't offer or begin to melt down beyond your comfort level. Memories are stored in our bodies, and both yoga and meditation can release them in unexpected ways. Besides the official capacities on the unit (chaplains, social workers, program staff, corrections officers) your greatest allies in helping you handle such challenges could be the other participants. I have been amazed again and again at the caring support and grounded wisdom inmates can show to one another. These are sometimes the same ones who roughly kid each other about stupid foibles. But when it is needed, they arise to help others, including me. And that is as it should be. The whole point of offering this class is less to teach and more to guide inmates to find their own higher selves.

### *Closing*

I keep time for the meditation with a digital watch and alarm. When the alarm beeps, I lead the group through the ending visualization, or merely ask us all to come back to our breath and the current reality, slowly opening our eyes if shut. I request the group to bring hands into prayer position and with a slight bow of respect to one another say "Namaste." Most oblige. But I am careful to allow those not comfortable saying a word they don't understand or that might feel not in keeping with their faith to stay silent.

While my initial plan had been to have sufficient time at the end of each class to share experiences and ask questions, I have ended up only doing so occasionally. We usually take longer in yoga than scheduled or have to clear and reset the room for another group coming in.

But the reality is most participants keep their internal experiences just that, internal. The prospect of exposing these reactions to the group for discussion freezes some up. Or it truncates the very experiences they might have otherwise worrying about what to say at the end more than just meditating. I've been in practice groups where such discussions are common. In the prison setting, though, I have found it less organic to the practice.

Some of the inmates want to talk to me on a more personal basis about what they are going through and how the class is helping or challenging them. Some offer to help me carry the equipment bags back to the gate and my car as a way to have that semi-private discussion. I enjoy these exchanges and use them to inform what I structure for classes in the future.

Those times when I do have a question and answer session, I announce it at the beginning and structure the class around open dialogue among participants. It is helpful to look around and see that enough experienced participants are there that night to have a robust discussion. I value others' answers as much as my own on issues such as the best way to stay focused in meditation if drowsy or to deal with angry thoughts.

Flexibility, adaptability, and sensitivity are just as important in choosing a close as they are in every other stage of the class. So test out which approaches in closing seem best to seal the session and set the stage for you and the participants the next time.





## *View From Inside the Gates*

Scary, Funny, Blissful, Agitating: Learning to Accept What Comes Up

By L. Robert Veeder

People are often surprised to hear that we have a yoga class. I mean, not too many prisons do. It's too bad. It's helped me profoundly. We usually do about 40 minutes of pretty basic stretches and then we sit, meditate for about 20 minutes. I was thrilled when I arrived here 2 years ago to learn that there was a yoga class. I had been trying to do yoga for the previous 5 years alone in my cell following along to what books I could acquire. I was never quite sure if what I was doing was right or not. Yoga from a book. That's tough. And don't even get me started on meditation. Over the past two years that has been probably one of my greatest personal discoveries. Learning how to sit, learning how to suffer. Again, I had been attempting this process alone, or through the comfort of books, for years. I knew that whatever I was doing couldn't be correct. It hurt too much to be correct, or I couldn't get the voice in my head to shut up long enough for it to be correct. I had a lot of questions about both of these, yoga and meditation. Now I had a nightly class once a week where I could go to search for the answers.

I've been going regularly for almost two years straight. I've missed a few classes here and there, sometimes opting to take advantage of the good weather and go for a run. Chris, due to the demands of his work and travel schedule, doesn't always make it here, and so sometimes we don't have class, but for the most part when Monday evenings at 6:00 roll around, I start thinking of stretches.

I sit everyday now. I usually sit for at least 40 minutes a day; frequently I meditate for much longer than that. I've learned that I WAS doing it right all those years. Meditation can hurt. It can hurt physically, emotionally. It can be scary, or sometimes funny, blissful or agitating. These days most of my meditations have been a practice of accepting whatever comes up with kindness, with gentleness. I also learned that the voice in my head never really does shut up for very long. It's scared and demands a lot of attention. Sitting still and quiet even for just a few minutes gives me time and space to give the voice the attention it so desperately desires.

To say that the yoga class has never been packed would be to utter a serious understatement. In two years, I think the most that I've ever seen in there has been maybe 8 or 9. Usually there are only three or four of us. Last night, there were two. Well, that's not entirely true. It started out with three of us: another regular, myself and one new guy. About 20 minutes into it, the new guy said that he had to do something real quick and that he'd be right back. He never returned.

So, these have traditionally been pretty small, intimate classes, but I was thinking about it last night and pretty much everybody that I've seen come to this class and then get out of prison is still out of

prison. That is remarkable – in fact, that’s unheard of! I’m not positive that it’s true, and if it is, I’m not 100% positive that it is simply the yoga class lowering recidivism, but I wouldn’t be so quick to write it off either.

We’ve had great times with Chris. We’ve laughed a lot (a couple of times we even experimented with laughing meditation.) We’ve tried chanting, sitting outside, had entire classes where none of us talked at all. We’ve had quiet solstice parties where we’ve shared our pasts with each other and our future hopes. And we’ve celebrated becoming close friends, supporting each other and then watching each other walk out of here, back into the world, returning citizens.

*Since this was written in 2010, Robert has gotten married, been released (in that order), begun college focusing on substance abuse counseling, and become a father. He still meditates and runs, including a 50K race, and laughs a lot.*

# Honoring and Enlivening the Space

## Heaven Help Us

I once led a group in prison through a guided meditation that involved walking through an imagined heaven and seeing all the places and people and other things that one would ideally want to be there. We each went room to room or space to space in our minds, seeing what popped up as being essential to our happiness. At the end we shared our experiences. There were loved ones mentioned; special childhood memories, foods and entertainments mentioned; and places and landscapes that each treasured and wanted to have some access to in the next life. When it came my turn to share, I said that I was as surprised as anyone to say that one image that came up strongly for me was the very room we were in, in prison, with this sangha of searching and laughing men. That seemed essential to any concept of heaven for me. Some shook their heads, and I confessed that I totally understood why none of them wanted this prison in their heaven. Yet I do think a number got why I might.

I consider all places potentially sacred, even a prison. How we honor the lives in those places and their potential is what makes them so. I offer a few additional topics here then that seem to resonate with the special practice space that is prison.

## Meditation and the 12 Steps

For a large percentage of inmates, addictions are a dominant part of their histories. It is not surprising, therefore, to see a large number of recovery programs offered within prisons. Most are of the 12-step variety, from Alcoholics Anonymous to Narcotics Anonymous, where groups meet to follow the path of recovery outlined in the late 1930s by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith in Ohio and expanded worldwide.

Whatever your experiences with or beliefs about the 12-step approach, it will likely be important to you and the inmates you are serving to be somewhat familiar with its tenants. There are innumerable online and published resources about the philosophy and history of the program and its many current forms. For the purposes of this guide, I want only to make a few additional comments about the most important of the 12 steps to our work -- step 11. This step says (in one version): "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out."

Most groups feel well versed in the "through prayer" part of that step but somewhat lost when it comes to understanding the meditation part. Some see them as synonyms, and in some views they may be, but our opportunity is to expand the understanding. The explanation I have given is that prayer and meditation can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Prayer is traditionally associated with an asking or seeking relationship toward a higher power, a communication mostly from the person to the higher source. Meditation is, in this context, a way to clear the mirror and open the mind so as to be ready to see

and understand the answers that may be coming back from God. If a higher power *is* trying to help us understand ourselves and guide us, it seems prudent to spend at least a little time each day in a purer listening mode, suspending our own narratives and desires.

In another context, meditation and yoga are about learning how to be with what *is*, even if uncomfortable or monotonous, rather than running to whatever has been the stimulus of choice. Needing frequent distractions from life through drugs, alcohol, sex, food, adrenaline, etc. has contributed to the situation most inmates find themselves in. So whether through the 12 steps or some other mode, I believe your work will be supportive of the recovery process and its long-term sustainability.

How seriously do the inmates take their connections to 12 step and other recovery efforts? It can vary, and certainly some go through the motions because they earn privileges for recorded attendance. Yet my experience is that for many it is a deep commitment they see as life saving.

A new volunteer on the unit approached me about participating in the yoga and meditation class. I was always open to such requests, especially since volunteers planning to take inmates out on passes needed to accumulate a certain number of hours volunteering within the gates first. Besides, this man had a long history of meditation with well known teachers. So I welcomed the additional knowledge. He came off and on over a few months. Then some of the inmates wanted to talk to me. They said he had begun taking folks off the unit for passes and was either smelling of alcohol or took them to places that served it. I noticed him seeming “mellow” at one of our classes. Finally, two inmates asked me if they could do a confront of the volunteer if he came to the class that night. They seemed sincerely motivated to help him. I agreed. Just then he showed up. I stepped outside and told him some of the fellows wanted to talk with him at the start of the class. I said many were in 12-step programs and had been disturbed by some of his behavior. He agreed to listen. It was as direct and compassionate a confront by the inmates as I could imagine. Never quite dealing with the question of his drinking, the volunteer responded with a lecture on all he knew that he could teach them and what they would lose by not having him around to help them. Then he stormed out. That was the end of his service at the unit. I was sad for him but amazed by and proud of the inmates. And as I told them, the main thing he misunderstood was that they had as much to teach any volunteer as vice versa.

## *View From Inside the Gates*

### Mindfulness and the Eleventh Step

By John Collins

I had become hopeless, and I had no use for a higher power, except when I was in trouble. I couldn't stop drinking and using drugs, and I was into increasing levels of trouble. Finally, in prison, for what I was determined to make the last time, I started making some changes and really trying to work the twelve-step program. But I was having a hard time with the eleventh step: "sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him (or Her or It)." It is a vital step. Because the whole point of the program is to become of maximum benefit to God and our fellows.

At the same time, I was wanting to improve my diet and decided to become a vegetarian. I needed to make the case for my vegetarian diet as being mandated by my religion, so I sort of stumbled into becoming a Buddhist. I started getting books on Buddhism, including those with instruction on meditation and yoga, such as *We're All Doing Time*. My curiosity was piqued. I started trying to meditate.

Some interesting things happened. Through a correspondence course I was studying Calculus. I remember encountering problems I could not figure out, no matter how hard I tried. There was no one I could ask about them. I could write the teacher with my questions, but it would take weeks to get an answer. Then through meditating, focusing on my breath, the answers to the problems would pop into my head. I started to realize there is really something to this meditation. I saw how it was my thoughts and my consciousness that were blocking me from my innate power and knowledge.

In addition to being able to concentrate better, I realized the benefits of meditation include resisting impulses toward drugs and alcohol or even saying something I would regret. For those years meditation was something I did on my own, using books or tapes, when they would be allowed by chaplains who thought it was pagan or dangerous in some way. I continued to do well in my studies, and I also noticed that I was less combative and belligerent, especially with the guards and specifically in the kitchen about my vegetarian diet. Due to the materials and the practices I was learning, such as loving-kindness meditation, and working the steps to recovery, my attitude changed.

Then I got transferred to a new unit. The very first day there a guy told me that there was a meditation class at the prison. I couldn't believe it. That same day I got to meet the man who led the class, Chris Canfield. He was there to take an inmate out on a volunteer pass to a meal and movie. That was amazing enough. And then he said he'd be back in a few days to lead the class.

I went to that first class not fully knowing what to expect. We did about 20-30 minutes of yoga at the start. It involved different poses for stretching and readying ourselves for seated meditation. Chris taught different kinds of meditations from a variety of traditions, but that night he led us through a basic silent meditation, very similar to what I had been doing on my own in prison for a couple of years. I sat that entire 30 minutes of the meditation with tears streaming down my face. They were tears from probably every emotion in the spectrum, but mostly tears of gratitude, love and hope. For the first time I felt that I wasn't so strange anymore. I wasn't alone. I believed in the meditation practice I had but I hadn't ever been able to practice it with anyone else. It was amazing to feel a common bond with the other people meditating, similar to the common bond we have in our 12-step group. Finally I was fulfilling the eleventh step.

*As of 2014, John has been sober 17 years, the ten in prison after getting arrested in a crack neighborhood driving a stolen car, plus seven since getting out. He seeks to share the gifts of the twelve steps and mindfulness practice with others every place they are welcomed and needed.*



## Predictability in an Unpredictable World

You need to be consistent even if the world in prison isn't. Many inmates will view you and what you have to offer skeptically. Trust is hard to come by in that setting. In their minds, you are probably just a fly-by-night do-gooder looking for the spectacle of life behind bars and once your curiosity is satisfied you'll move on. So be first clear with yourself. What can you commit to on a recurring basis? Coming less often but regularly may be more important than frequent but sporadic enthusiasm. Then be clear with the inmates. Let them know what you will do, what your limitations are, and what effort you will make to fill in or inform them should promises be difficult to keep.

In spite of the best intentions and efforts, sometimes you just can't keep an appointment for a class. If I know at least one class ahead of time, I will let those in attendance know we will be skipping a week and ask that they share with others. If at the last minute, I will try to have someone in programs or the main office let the group or someone in the group know that I won't make it. In the latter case, you can expect the ball to get dropped often. Too many times I've arrived for the next session to discover no one let the inmates know about my absence. While they are used to things not happening the way they wanted or expected, it is that very fact that should make you strive even more to uphold your commitments. You don't want to become just one more thing that won't work out and will continually let them down.

There are other forms of unpredictability you will need to prepare for that are beyond you keeping your own commitments. What if the room you regularly use is not available because another meeting was scheduled there? Instead of making a fuss, show your undaunted character. Could you meet in the kitchen, the library, the recreation space? I once was relegated to an outside gravel picnic area right next to a main thoroughfare for inmates going between buildings. There was no room for mats or blankets so we did standing yoga postures only. That got some laughs from passers by. But there was a beautiful, huge oak tree in the middle of a deck area there. The tree and its life and all it had seen became the focus of our meditation. I promised the participants (with more bravado than certainty) that if we sat around that tree with dignity and solid intention, none of those walking by would interrupt or heckle us. By grace, we weren't bothered. In fact, some participants said it was one of the more powerful meditations they had experienced, exposed as they were to their fellow inmates and under that amazing tree.

Since life in prison contains constant distraction, unrelenting noise, and a loss of personal space, our mindfulness programs should demonstrate how there is still inner peace available. When, ten minutes into a meditation, the loudspeaker blares out demands for a list of inmates to come to the sergeant's office, gently guide the group back to their breath. If the sounds are more constant than punctuated, invite the group to open to it all, allowing the sounds to merge into a universal hum of life, discriminating against none, at least for the time of the meditation. Or let repeating, unrelenting sounds (the broken washing machine squeaking next door) become a mantra, a focus for concentration rather than irritation. Guards will enter the room at various times. Just hold the space with lightness and even



humor allowing what needs to transpire to finish and then return to the intentions of your class. Like tree pose, let the class live the balance that is only possible with constant sensitivity and adjustment to what is rather than what we want there to be.

### **Being a Friend While Being a Teacher**

Being a teacher of any sort is fraught with ethical challenges. You want students to like you, yet you want their respect. You find individuals you have a lot in common with or find entertaining, yet you wonder how much of a friend you can afford to be without diminishing your effectiveness as a teacher. And at some time we all receive projections from students who cast us as more than we know ourselves to be. Do we disappoint them and reveal our true selves? Or do we try to live up to the more pristine image in their eyes? (The truth is, we will always disappoint them eventually, but that doesn't mean we should work at it.)

All these challenges are heightened in the prison setting. Inmates are often hungry for hope, for personal connections, and affection. And simultaneously they can be wary of authority, cynical about belief systems, and certain that everyone will fail them, including themselves.

So those of use volunteering to lead mindfulness training walk into minefields of expectations, both positive and negative. Nowhere have I felt myself so called to be centered and grounded. It can feel like a tightrope walk where the slightest imbalance proves disastrous.

As a man among other men, I have been especially challenged by my own need to be liked, respected, thought cool, even rebellious. I've wanted to show some sort of street credibility by learning the prison lingo and rules. Some of this is natural and acceptable in the situation. After all, communication is a two-way street, and to be effective we should gain better understanding of where the students heads are. But it can be a slippery slope from teacher to friend to buddy to co-conspirator.

Take for example the inmate or convict code. The code is a set of unwritten rules that have evolved over many generations defining what it means for an inmate to be doing time right or wrong, as judged by fellow inmates. Even as convicts form rival cliques among themselves, they are expected to be united against the guards and administration. They look down on those who rat out another inmate, no matter what is at stake. Inmates should keep their word. And they shouldn't steal from or fight with other inmates. If they do violate the code, they are expected to take the consequences of their choices like men, without whining. I'm sure there are many more nuances to the code that I'm not privy to.

The point is that this is a different world from the one most of the rest of us inhabit. As you interact with inmates, you can be drawn into the dramas of their incarcerated lives, and wonder at the strange justice that is meted out between each other and from the guards to inmates (or even vice versa). You will be told stories that will keep you up at night. And at some point you are likely to be asked to take a side in a disagreement, to agree that some injustice was done through logic you may not understand. Be very



cautious. Our job as teachers is to offer more universal ways to see justice, compassion, forgiveness, and self-respect. I have failed to keep that higher vision a notable few times and fallen into more petty views, either because I was scared of appearing uncool to the group or because the situation ignited my own memories of prior “injustices” I hadn’t let go of. It felt good to be part of the gang for a moment, to challenge authority (even if just among ourselves). Inevitably, though, and perhaps days later, I’d feel ashamed of letting myself get drawn into the drama, and in doing so letting down myself and the students. Avoiding this trap, while also not becoming inflexible and righteous by whatever moral codes we’ve inherited, is a great challenge. As Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers Neighborhood fame once said, “Try making being good attractive. It is the hardest assignment you’ll ever have.” No harder anywhere than in prison. By the way, Fred Rogers was a great, if quiet, supporter of prison outreach work.

So what if you do learn of an injustice that was done that is clearly wrong by any code? Part of your training by the prison before volunteering should include what information you learn that you must report to authorities. Usually knowledge of improper sexual relations among volunteers and inmates must be reported. This rule is meant to protect inmates, in which case you would be an advocate for their rights and vulnerabilities. At least that is the theory. Perhaps most important is to let inmates know early on and frequently that you operate under your own set of rules and codes. You are not an inmate. Nor are you part of the administration. You exist somewhere between and even apart from those two. But in the end your ability to offer the yoga and meditation depends on the continued agreement of the prison officials. Violate their rules and you could lose that privilege, or worse.

What if the injustice you see is the product of what you perceive as abusive and arbitrary rules of the prison itself? Then you have a hard choice to make. Are you more effective helping the inmates on the inside through the mindfulness training or are you more effective fighting the system from the outside? Because taking on the administration of the prison is very likely to get you banned from coming back inside as a volunteer. If you have developed good relations with some key leaders of the administration, then perhaps you can intercede with at least questions and express concerns on behalf of inmates. I’ve been successful in some situations doing just that. It is still a calculated risk.

The truth is we need people dedicated to prison reform everywhere. Making prisons more humane, more supportive of rehabilitation for those capable of it, and asking our society to take more responsibility for how we prepare inmates to eventually leave prison are laudable and necessary. But taking on all that in any vocal and visible way while expecting to continue volunteering inside is naive.

Can you maneuver through these varying codes and rules and come away with lasting connections to the people you get to know inside prison? My unequivocal answer is “yes.” I enjoy deep and lifelong friendships with both inmates (current and former) and administration officials. Good, openhearted, self-aware people are everywhere. Respecting our different roles doesn’t preclude appreciating our common spirits.

## Teaching Inside Different Kinds of Facilities

The experiences related in this guide all come from teaching in a men's minimum security prison. No doubt there are many similarities and many differences to bringing the same program to a maximum-security unit or a women's prison or to a jail setting. It is probably worth seeking advice from those engaged in teaching at those kinds of facilities if you are planning on following the same path. A search of the web reveals a growing movement of prison outreach efforts that involve meditation or yoga or both (for instance, [www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/she-was-teaching-meditation-to-inmates-would-it-help-them/2014/02/27/46919a52-642e-11e3-91b3-f2bb96304e34\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/she-was-teaching-meditation-to-inmates-would-it-help-them/2014/02/27/46919a52-642e-11e3-91b3-f2bb96304e34_story.html)).

One such teacher is Elizabeth Johnstone who runs Recovery Yoga (see: [recoveryyoga.org](http://recoveryyoga.org); and [www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-schware/service-yoga\\_b\\_1829275.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-schware/service-yoga_b_1829275.html)). Another is Anneke Lucas, part of the Prison Yoga Project that James Fox created (see: [prisonyoga.org](http://prisonyoga.org) and; [www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-schware/yoga-prisons\\_b\\_3051948.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-schware/yoga-prisons_b_3051948.html)). And another sampling comes from the Zen community (see: [www.upaya.org/2011/09/guidance-for-teaching-meditation-in-prison/](http://www.upaya.org/2011/09/guidance-for-teaching-meditation-in-prison/)). There are many more resources for help, advice, and training if you are motivated to look and ask. *Sacred Gates* is but one contribution to a wealth of expertise and goodwill out there.

The overarching commonality, though, seems to be that wherever you seek to teach among those incarcerated, you will be challenged by the unexpected, graced by the discounted, and rewarded by the unearned.

*I honor the place in you in which the entire universe dwells. I honor the place in you that is of love, of truth, of light, and of peace. When you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me, we are one.*

*Namaste'*



## ADDITIONAL PRACTICES

The resources section further below offers a range of guides on yoga and meditation that contain detailed practices to bring to the prison. Here I highlight some special practices I have adapted or created in my program that seem especially effective or just downright fun.

### **Silent Session**

“Silence is golden” is a saying that has special meaning for the incarcerated. From the hum of industrial fans and blasting announcement from speakers to the constant din of hundreds of inmates talking, prison offers little peace and quiet. I came up with this version of a mini-retreat that many appreciate. It does depend on having a core group of participants who have enough experience from guided classes to be able to lead themselves. New participants may find this awkward but can follow those nearby or watch you as the teacher. Figure out what version of this works best in your setting. Some teachers have tried extending this silent retreat over days, with students agreeing to remain silent and include practices in their daily routines. One unit in Alabama allowed a full ten-day Vipassana retreat (see “The Dhamma Brothers” in Resources below). Obviously you’d need agreement and support of the administration.

Prior to the beginning of the class, come early and on the outside of the door, post a sign that says “Please Enter in Silence.” You’ll need a small gong, bell or chime to indicate shifts. As participants enter the room, hand them something like the following sheet of instructions.

# Please Enter in Silence

## SILENT SESSION

*“All things begin in silence. All things are contained in silence. And so it follows that our silent conversations of the heart are some of our loudest.”* -- Conni Ellisor, Nashville, TN, composer and musician

During this Meditation Session, please observe silence. Try to take this time to enter more deeply into yourself, into your peaceful space, and into the respectful communion of our meditation group.

The only sounds you will hear (other than the loudspeaker!) will be my gong. First, silently prepare the space for meditation, moving tables, chairs and sweeping.

Gong 1 – Self-guided stretching/yoga/energy work. We will each do what we want to; listen to what your body may wish for today prior to meditation.

Gong 2 – End stretching and gather blankets and pillows for seated meditation. Come into meditation position.

Gong 3 – Begin silent meditation using the method (breathing, counting, visualizing, etc.) you most prefer or that feels right today.

Gong 4 – (after my watch beeps) Use these few moments to collect good feelings from this period and then in some way share positive feelings with others.

Gong 5 – Open eyes and come back present with the group.

We will then fold hands in front of our chests and bow forward, mouthing a silent “Namaste”.

Rest a moment, then rise without speaking, replace blankets and pillows, move tables and chairs back.

Let us leave the space in silence. Return this sheet as you leave. We can talk again once outside, but hold onto the deepest part of the silence as long as you can.

Thanks once again for being open to exploring this!

## Laughing Meditation

I discovered laughing meditation through my close friend Scott Campbell, a yoga teacher and former actor. His energy and humor are infectious, and he has a calming voice when needed. So I was a little wary of bringing his version of this raucous practice into the unit. I also didn't want guards storming the room thinking we had lost our marbles. But it has turned out to be an amazing offering, if done only occasionally. Laughter (even if faked) opens people in ways few other things can, so don't be surprised if vulnerabilities surface for participants as a result.

### *The Best Medicine: Laughing Meditation*

By Scott Campbell

There are many styles and forms of Laughter Therapy, and Laughing Meditation is just one. What they all offer is an opportunity to explore our relationship to laughter and receive the many healing benefits that laughter can bring. Laughing is innately a part of our human experience, and there is a good reason it has been called "the best medicine." Studies have shown that extended laughter can ease mild depression as it produces endorphins, helps to regulate blood sugar levels, and aids in relieving stress and high blood pressure. It can stimulate the immune system and even bring about weight loss! We all can laugh. Sometimes we can't help responding to something before us without laughing. As children we laugh close to 600 times a day, and often very spontaneously and for no reason at all, but as we age we laugh less and less as life's challenges take their toll.

Laughing Meditation is a tool to remedy that loss of spontaneous joy and bring healing to the body and being. As you explore laughter as a group, you may find at first it is challenging to laugh for no good reason. You may have to fake it until you make it, and fake laughter has been shown to have the same benefits as real laughter. You can also make the sounds HA HA HA, HO HO HO, HEE HEE HEE, and that can help, too. Here are some general suggestions you can follow, but feel free to get creative and do what feels right for you or the group. You can go to [www.laughingmeditation.com](http://www.laughingmeditation.com) for more details and photos.

1. *Set up.* Begin in a circle and use yoga mats or any props such as blankets or towels to be more comfortable. Explain the benefits of laughter and the general format of the class. Make sure everyone knows not to talk or invade someone's space once the laughing begins, and to not make fun of anyone else's laughter.
2. *Warm up.* Standing, loosen up the body by swinging your arms side to side gently twisting the spine, and then up and down opening the shoulders. Shake a bit and make sounds. Stick your tongue out as far as you can and roar like a lion. Make it silly to get people in the mood to laugh. You can practice HA HA HA, HO HO HO, HEE HEE HEE, and fake laughter.

3. *Laughing.* Once you feel warmed up, then lie on your backs with heads facing the center of the circle. Breathe deeply together a few times. You can just begin to laugh, but it can also be helpful to do the sound “OM” if that is comfortable, or “AMEN” ... then begin to laugh. It may take a while to build, and start with fake laughter if needed, but eventually the group will get going. Don’t try to force it; there may be periods of silence. If the group is having trouble getting going suggest they laugh like a particular animal, such as a monkey or a dog. Try timing this period of laughter to at least 10 minutes, but longer is good too. Going as long as 20 minutes is fine. When time is up you can signal with an “OM” or simply say “time’s up.” It may take a bit of time for people to stop laughing, especially in a larger group, and deep breathing can help. Also, tissues may be needed as the lymphatic system is stimulated, and may cause the sinuses to drain or be stopped up.

4. *Quiet time.* The group now lies in stillness for ten minutes or more. This is a chance to notice thoughts, emotions, body sensation, and the overall effect of the laughter. Give that suggestion, and also suggest the eyes be closed for inward focus. It may be difficult for some to stop giggling, which is fine. If it extends too long, you might allow that person to step out of the room and return when settled.

5. *Gentle stretch.* Because the laughter can be quite frenetic, grounding the experience with gentle yoga or stretching and a guided deep relaxation can be very useful to feel energized, but also balanced and relaxed. If you know yoga do some gentle poses on the back first and then the belly, and then return to the back for relaxation. Otherwise if you do not know yoga, you can simply rock the knees to the chest and/or circle them. Then, with the knees bent and the feet on the floor let the knees fall in unison to one side and then the other in an easy twist. Turn to lie on the belly and rock bent knees side to side. With the legs straight and hips grounded, and the hands under the shoulders like a push up position, lift the head and chest to an easy back bend. Then with the head and chest back down and the arms straight alongside the body, lift one leg straight behind you, lower it, then repeat with the other. Turn over on the back again and hug the knees to the chest, then lift the head bringing the forehead towards the knees.

6. *Guided relaxation.* Lying on the back with the eyes closed, do one or both of these sequences, depending on time. (a) Tensing and relaxing the muscles with the breath. Focus on the legs and the feet. Inhale, tighten the muscles in the legs and feet, exhale and relax. Now focus on the hands and arms. Inhale, tighten the muscles of the hands and arms, exhale and relax. Next bring awareness to the belly and chest. Inhale, filling up the belly and chest, then exhale and relax. Repeat, holding the breath for a bit longer, and then exhale completely and relax the belly and chest. Now shift to the muscles of the face. Squeeze all the muscles of the face towards the nose making a “prune face.” Tighten, and then relax. Stretch the face lifting the eyebrows, sticking out the tongue trying to touch the chin, then relax. Have them make any adjustments so they can be still if you are doing the next sequence; if not just let them be still in silence again for a while. (b) Progressive relaxation. Begin with the toes and suggest they relax them. Follow this sequence slowly: Bottoms and tops of the feet relax. Ankles, shins, calves, and knees relax. Thighs, backs of the thighs, buttocks, hips and pelvis relax. Lower belly, lower back, mid back, mid belly, chest, and

upper back relax. Upper arms, elbows, forearms, hands, and fingers relax. Neck and throat, jaw, tongue, cheek bones relax. Eyes and eye muscles relax. Eyebrows and the space between them relax. Forehead, sides of the head, back of the head, and top of the head relax. Silence.

7. *Ending.* To come out, have participants notice the breath. Then breathe a bit deeper and wiggle the fingers and toes. Bend the knees and roll to one side and press up to a seated position facing the center of the circle. Hands may be moved to prayer position at the heart, followed by a shared “Namaste.”

These are but suggestions, so improvise as needed and take a light-hearted approach to whatever happens. It is about laughter after all!



## **Open-Eyed Meditation - Outside**

When the weather (and the guards) allow it, I take the participants outside to sit in an area where they could have a relatively good view of some natural areas. Granted there is a fence in the way and lots of activity and noise nearby. But the sky and clouds and birds and squirrels don't recognize such barriers.

My instructions are simple: Sit facing an open area in the normal meditation posture, only keep your eyes fully open for the entire meditation. Pick a general area in which to look and do not move your head back and forth or up and down. But do allow your eyes to move, your focus to change and your view to broaden to include your peripheral vision. See how conscious you can become of the tiniest details in one part of your vision and/or the widest array of sights and sensations from within this little window of your eyes. Included should be bodily sensations - what is the breeze on the hairs of the arm like? the sounds of distant traffic mixing with the rattle of the chain-link or tree branches?

An added benefit of this meditation, besides heightened awareness of how rich an experience even a prison yard can be, is that it gives inmates a mode of meditation they can practice inconspicuously anywhere. For a number in the class, this meditation is their favorite.



## Chair Yoga

Growing out of the need for more gentle stretches that older or arthritic patients or others with physical limitations can do, chair yoga also provides an option for when cleared floor space and/or mats are not available. I regularly rotate it into my repertoire just to add variety and to demonstrate that yoga, like meditation, can be done almost anywhere (such as in an office or at the airport as I do, I explain). In that vein, you can also do the meditation after the yoga seated in the chairs.

It is best to have chairs without arms. Folding chairs work well enough, although desk chairs with slight padding and straighter backs are better. A search on the web will provide plenty of written and visual guides to this format. A sample routine follows. Be careful that chairs are stable and don't slide.

- Begin seated with feet flat on the ground, backs straight and not resting against the chair. Put hands on top of the knees, with legs bent close to 90 degrees.
- Back Stretch: On an inhale, lift the chest forward and allow the head to move up and slightly back. On the exhale, collapse the center of the chest toward the back of the chair. Be far enough away from the back of the chair to allow for a concave chest. Follow the breath to arch and fold.
- Forward Fold: Bending at the hip crease, bring the chest toward the thighs, which are held close together. If your body allows, dangle the arms over the knees and toward the floor and release the head and neck. Breathe deeply to expand and stretch the mid and lower back area while folded. After sinking as far as is comfortable, rise up slowly. Variations to go deeper would involve moving the knees and thighs wider apart in stages until hands are on the floor.
- Hip Opener: From the seated position, place one ankle on the opposite knee. Try to create a flat, 90-degree angle from hip to knee to ankle. But that will depend on flexibility. A light pressure on the knee with the hand can help it open at first. Then extending upward with the spine, lean forward and out as you move the chest toward the shin. If flexible enough, you can bring the arms and head past the shin and have them reach toward the floor. Breathe into the hip and gently invite it to relax and open. Switch sides.
- Seated Twist: Cross one leg over the other with knee on top of knee. Take the arm opposite the top knee and (left arm on top of right knee) and place the hand on top of or just past the knee. Sit tall on the inhale and with the exhale twist toward the hand (to the right if left hand is on the knee). Slowly, inhale to exhale, lengthen then twist toward the back of the chair. If the body allows, the other hand or arm can go on the top of the seat back and leverage for a deeper twist. Keep breathing, then slowly release and repeat on the opposite side.

- Hamstring Stretch: While still seated, straighten both legs and rest the heels on the floor. Bend forward from the hip and feel your way to a supported hamstring opener. Give the position plenty of time to invite the hamstrings to open.

Additional poses can be done while standing or lying down using the chair as a prop. For example:

- Supported Forward Bends: Stand behind the back of the chair. Adjust your position so that as you bend forward arms are outstretched fully and resting on the top of the back of the chair. If possible, create a 90-degree angle, stretching both hamstrings and the back. Ask participants to play with the posture, perhaps bending one knee then the other, or taking a slight twist to one side or the other, all the while keeping hands and feet supported and grounded. After a few minutes, rise up slightly and then turn the feet so that heels are together and toes point opposite each other (what I call the Charlie Chaplin). Release the back down again toward 90 degrees. This stretch reaches new parts of the legs and hips. Alternately, reverse the orientation of the feet -- toes together and heels out. Again, experiment with slight twists in one direction or the other and pulling the belly more toward the floor. Come out slowly and note the difference in legs and back.
- Side Bend: Turn sideways to the chair seat. Raise one leg and rest the inner part of the foot on the seat while standing solidly on the other. Slide one hand down the outer leg toward the foot on the chair seat. Raise the opposite arm toward the ceiling and bend sideways to follow the hand sliding toward the seat. Repeat on the opposite side.
- Supported Down Dog: Facing the seat of the chair, hold on to either side of the seat as you move your legs away and form a V with your bent waist. Again, make certain chair is stable and not likely to slide (it can be put on a mat if available). Stress moving weight toward the heels rather than leaning too much onto the seat. This abbreviated down dog can help ease some into the version we normally do on the floor.
- Dead Man's Pose With Raised Legs: It can be nice to end a yoga session with this pose that gently moves blood away from the legs toward the heart and head. Lie down with head away from the chair. Raise legs and rest them on the chair seat, pulling it toward you as needed to feel fully supported from ankles to knees which keeping the lower back fully on the floor. Once situated comfortably, release all tension in legs, back, arms, and neck and breathe naturally and deeply. At the end of the pose, come out gently, either pushing chair away and lowering legs or rolling easily to one side.

## Guided Visualization - Journey to Your Special Place

While most meditations I teach are silent, sometimes I provide some narration to guide the class members on a mental journey. Not all people process visually in their minds, and some have difficulty following verbal instructions like these, so consider it an offering with no real expectations of outcomes. For those who do respond well, they tell me it is a favorite technique and one they use on their own.

A sample narration might be (with silent periods between each section):

*For the next few breaths, gradually deepen awareness of how each breath enters your body, the sensations as it enters your nose, goes down your throat, fills your lungs, and then pauses and releases. (...)*

*Now imagine you are in your favorite place in the world. It could be a special natural area, such as the beach or the mountains, your grandmother's house, an imaginary landscape, or any place you feel especially comfortable and relaxed. Feel the sensations of the place. What do you see? What do you hear? How do you feel? Take the time to re-familiarize yourself with the surroundings and associations. (...)*

*Begin moving within your special place, going room by room or along a path, allowing whatever appears to come to you. Know that it is safe and comforting wherever you go. What presents itself to you? How do you interact with what you encounter? (...)*

*If you like, let a person, real or imagined, who means a great deal to you appear in the place with you. See them smile at you and feel their positive energy directed toward you. Imagine that without speaking they hold out their hand and offer you a secret gift. Without knowing what it is, receive it in your hand and hold it tight. (...)*

*Continue your journey, imaging new experiences and parts of your magical place. What new images or feelings are present? Is there any music or other sounds associated with the place? (...)*

*You are coming to the end of your journey, but first pause for a moment and look around in your mind's eye and appreciate all this place means to you. Now imagine looking down to your hand, the one that received the gift, and slowly open it. What is in it? Don't think too much about it, just see whatever your mind instantly suggests is there. Is it an object? Is something written? What might it mean to you? (...)*

*Return in your mind to this room and this place, becoming once again attentive to your breath. Inhale fully. Exhale fully. Take a few more breaths to ground in the present moment. Now slowly open your eyes.*

At the end of this session you can go ask those who would like to to share some of their experiences and particularly if there was some message awaiting them in the present they received. Or you can just allow the participants to take the experience with them as a secret exploration of their inner world.

## Fire Meditation

I certainly appropriated this meditation from other sources, at least in pieces, but I can't determine what they were now. There are elements very much like the charnel ground meditations of Buddhist practitioners (where the meditation is done among piles of burning corpses to remind one of impermanence and death). If a participant fully commits to it, this meditation can be a pretty intense experience, so exercise good judgment in employing it. Still, given what many in prison have been through, it seems valuable to remind them what is mere appearance and what is at their core, as it is at all our cores - a hard diamond of inviolate goodness and light. At least that is my heartfelt assumption.

At the beginning of the meditation, ask participants to see their seated posture, with legs crossed rising into the pyramid of the body, as being like a fire laid, with starter, kindling and logs placed neatly together. Then imagine a match lighting the very bottom of the laid fire of the meditator. Fanned by each breath the flames grow, slowly, gaining fuel and burning through layers. Encourage participants to see these flames as purifying and helpful, not damning and painful. They should, as much as possible, allow the flames to consume every part of themselves: the body, with all its physical attributes and all its limitations; the reputation associated with this incarnation, both "good" and "bad" elements; actions of the past and possible ones of the future; even aspirations to spiritual accomplishment. Allow an extended period of silence for each to accomplish this living cremation of sorts in his or her own way.

At the end of the meditation, bring the attention back to the breath. Ask the class members to see a pile of embers among the ashes of what was their bodies, their thoughts about themselves, their hoped for image among others. As they expand their breathing, the embers grow bright, but one is clearly brighter than the rest. Focus on this and see it rising from the bed of ashes. Imagine its light growing whiter and more intense. Suggest they see this as their diamond-like essence, a pure, unchangeable goodness. Now have them focus on this diamond and its light, having it radiate out compassion in all directions, first in the room for all there, then across the prison unit, the state, the nation, around the world and then out into the universe.

As they slowly open their eyes, honor the light of goodness in each of them and every other being.

## RESOURCES

What follows are a few books and other resources (such as references to websites) I've found helpful in expanding my knowledge, comfort level and practical skills for volunteering in the prison. Most have their own lists of references and resources so it can become an infinite progression of referrals. I am reminded again and again that as helpful as reading about practice can be, it is no substitute for actually practicing.

- *We're All Doing Time: A Guide for Getting Free*, Bo Lozoff, 1985. The foundational work for the Human Kindness Foundation's Prison-Ashram Project. Lozoff's work has been sent to prisons around the world, and it is likely wherever you volunteer someone in the place will have read it. The writing introduces many useful concepts and practices, from chakras, meditation, and yoga, to diet, ethics, and religion. Also a section of correspondence between Lozoff and those incarcerated. Subsequent writings, *Just Another Spiritual Book*, *Deep and Simple*, and *It's a Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice* bring new and deepening layers of insight from Lozoff, for those incarcerated and the rest of us, too. They also contain suggested practices that you could bring into a mindfulness class. See: <http://www.humankindness.org>
- *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row*, Jarvis Jay Masters, 1997. A series of personal stories and reflections from someone living with the death penalty. He has undergone significant transformations in his outlook, embraced Buddhist practices, and sought to extend insight and compassion to his fellow inmates and beyond.
- *Yoga: A Path for Healing and Recovery*, James Fox, 2011. This compact guide by the Prison Yoga Project is designed to allow prisoners to learn and lead their own yoga practices; it has many helpful insights for a volunteer seeking to bring the practices to those incarcerated. Fox has taught yoga and mindfulness practices at San Quentin State Prison as well as juvenile detention and residential treatment facilities. See: <http://prisonyoga.org>
- *Bringing Yoga to Life: The Everyday Practice of Enlightened Living*, Donna Farhi, 2003. There are many fine guides to yoga, both the physical poses and the traditions behind them. But what sets Farhi's work apart for us volunteer teachers is that it focuses on translating all the bells and whistles of modern yoga into simple terms that can help focus the intention of what you bring into prison. How does yoga help make us more fully human?
- *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind*, Pema Chodron, 2013. Chodron is one of the most popular authors and speakers in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition today. Almost any of her books or audio programs are worth listening to; they offer comfort on the difficulties of life we all share (even a spiritual leader like her) and principles to follow as a path back to sanity and compassion.

This is one of the more direct of her works, focusing on the fundamentals of her version of meditation. For more options, see: <http://pemachodronfoundation.org>

- *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*, Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999. In characteristic simple language and images Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has become known for, this book provides guidance not just for seated meditation but for turning every moment (eating, walking, cleaning) into a mindfulness practice.
- *Teaching Mindfulness: A Practical Guide for Clinicians and Educators*, Donald McCown, Diane Reibel, Marc S. Micozzi, with a foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn, 2011. An extremely helpful collection of essays on mindfulness as a curriculum and profession. Some sections are accessible to anyone interested in teaching, while others are somewhat academic, more appropriate for those in medical, or university settings. The foreword by Zinn is a great summation of the goal of mindfulness and an encouragement to those wishing to teach it. Extensive resources section at back.
- *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Jon-Kabat-Zinn, 2009. The 15th anniversary edition (with new introductions) of this classic of mind-body medicine. Zinn is the creator and most visible proponent of mindfulness as a westernized, non-religious/non-spiritual component of healing practices, as developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. The work describes the emergence of this healing approach from other sources and provides many useful practices to try with your students.
- *How Yoga Works*, Geshe Michael Roach, 2004. In spite of the title, this extended parable is not so much about the physical forms of yoga as its deeper moral and spiritual aspects. It is the story of a young Tibetan yogini in 1100 AD who is seemingly unfairly detained and jailed in an outpost district of India. From within her prison, she applies her lessons from yoga to help herself and those around her and reveal the nuances of the yogic path. Roach also wrote *The Tibetan Book of Yoga*.
- *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards*, William J. Broad, 2012. Broad is a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and a lifelong yoga practitioner. This work seeks to demystify (at least in part) the benefits of yoga and also to point out poses and practices that could cause real harm. A good mix of inspiration and caution, especially helpful as you seek to bring the practices to those incarcerated.
- *Finding Grace at the Center: The Beginning of Centering Prayer*, M. Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating, and Thomas E. Clarke, 2002. Meditation from a Christian (Catholic) perspective showing the ancient roots of contemplative practices within Christianity and suggesting how to integrate now within personal practices for the faithful. A nice alternative approach for those in your classes who worry that mindfulness is too “eastern” or in conflict with their church. Originally published 1978. Father Richard Rohr (Center for Action and Contemplation, [cac.org](http://cac.org)) embraces these teaches in his writings (such as *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*) if you want to connect mindfulness to Christianity further.

- *Doing Your Time with Peace of Mind: A Meditation Manual for Prisoners*, Doug Booth, 2005, available for free download at [www.mindfulnet.org/Doing\\_your\\_time\\_with\\_peace\\_of\\_mind.pdf](http://www.mindfulnet.org/Doing_your_time_with_peace_of_mind.pdf). This is a very direct and clear guide written in question-and-answer style at the start followed by descriptions of half a dozen meditation practices. Booth teaches meditation as part of the Heart Mountain Prison Project in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which he founded.
- *The Dhamma Brothers*, documentary film by Jenny Phillips, released in 2007. A maximum-security prison in Alabama experiments with a ten-day Vipassana retreat for selected inmates in early 2000s. The film includes interviews with inmates, guards, chaplain, and administrators and shows the challenges and rewards of working in such an environment with these men. A fantastic way to “experience” some of what I’ve tried to relate in this guide. Could also be shared with administrators to show the potential of even a less intensive program. There is also a follow-up book: *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers: Meditation Behind Bars*. See <http://www.dhammabrothers.com>.

