In prison the body is confined. The spirit and soul need not be. Thousands of inmates around the country are using their confinement to trigger an inward journey. They are traveling to a place of greater joy, peace, and freedom. You are invited to join in.

In 2002, hundreds of folks who actively support contemplative work in jails and prisons came together to share our stories at a conference on “Imprisonment and Transformation.” We wanted to find ways to better serve prisoners, their families, victims of crime, and prison staff. We believe that incarceration can be more than just serving time, wasting time, killing time. It can be a precious time for inner change.

Incarcerated men and women joined in by sending letters about their contemplative practices. They describe the freeing effects it has had on their lives. Their stories are as diverse as their spiritual orientations: Buddhist, Christian, Native American, Muslim, Jewish, and atheist. What they all have in common is the dedication to an inward journey. They are seeking to be at peace with themselves and the world around them.

The techniques they have used are simple and usually involve sitting in silence. Focusing, Relaxing, Listening, Breathing with attention. Bowing in prayer, Creating a time and space not to do anything, but to. Such simple practices have helped those inside and outside of prison to find the freedom within. They describe letting go of what seemed the “big problems in life” and the anger and self hate that cause us upset. They feel in touch with the ultimate Power, however one defines it, that gifts us with life, love, and joy.

We hope this will encourage you to experiment personally with sitting in silence. Change begins with you, one moment, one breath at a time. Change always happens in the now, not the past or future.

You might also be able to find or start a contemplative group in your institution. This is seeking information, help, and support in developing a meditative practice. Don’t hesitate to contact one or more of these groups.

Resources for Those on a Contemplative Path Inside Jails and Prisons

THE POWER OF MEDITATION
Finding the Freedom Within

I
If we wish to hear the truth of the Universe, whether or not we call it the voice of God, we must sit down and shut up to listen. Whether or not we call it the voice of God, we must sit down and shut up to listen.

As a Muslim, I have been fortunate enough to be guided and have a sense of spiritual direction that I lacked before becoming incarcerated. In my situation, the feeling of belonging to humanity is often forgotten and diminished. This has also reminded me of the transforming power that unchanging Truth has to offer anyone who is willing to seek it within themselves and others for the good nature that we all share.

This has helped me immensely to emerge from the prison of the mind that was my life even before entering this prison of the world… Marty, Sheridan, Ore.

I was born nonconsciously until I made the choice to find silence… In drinking silence, I was able to see God's buffer zone around me, relieving the pressure of the world… Ron, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.

I'd tried several of the chapel and 12-step groups over the years on different prison yards none of them seemed to touch my heart or hold my attention. The only night I followed a large and diverse group of prisoners into the chapel. Out in the yard, this group would be segregated by racial boundaries. But here they were greeting each other, talking to each other, as if no barriers existed. This is not what I'd learned to expect in prison… As it turned out this group had been meeting in chapel for a long time, sitting in a large circle for silent meditation. I was very wrong for the group, though diverse in their beliefs, was willing to share silent meditation together. Greg, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.

Now I view meditation as a method of calming the mind and emotional charged feelings. I have since learned how to use meditation as a form of relaxation. I have found it to be a great help to me in dealing with the stress that comes with prison life. Joe, California Men's Colony, San Luis Obispo, Calif.

The course you have created offered a clear manual and practical application to spiritual growth. It effectively demonstrates to the average layman and practical application to spiritual growth. It effectively demonstrates to the average layman the innate awareness of Truth within us all. I have been deeply impressed with the fact that meditation has been such an important part of my personal growth in this prison. It has added to the purity, and amplifies what is Truth. Walter, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.

Testimonies of Silence

Life is full of violence, I have lived with a lot of violence. I tattooed my body with loving words. I was living in a prison where the world was a constant battle. I filled my head with a lot of reasons not to change or try something that would help me. I look back at my life now and wish my heart and my entire being could have been the way it is now. I like the warm and peaceful feelings it gives me. I can escape the prison walls whenever I want, just by sitting on the floor and letting it all flow. I know that the man who was afraid to change, has!

Billy, California Men’s Colony, San Luis Obispo, CA

I was the shy guy that would hide from large crowds and not talk to anyone because I would get so nervous no one could hear me. Why do I wish my heart and my entire being could have been the way it is now? I like the warm and peaceful feelings it gives me. I can escape the prison walls whenever I want, just by sitting on the floor and letting it all flow. I know that the man who was afraid to change, has!

Awareness of energy is a vehicle for awakening. We align ourselves with the power to change our lives for the good. I find that meditation, on a daily basis, helps me to maintain my calm while I’m soul searching—and then my self-discipline sets in automatically.

Huero, California Men’s Colony, San Luis Obispo, CA

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• Only if none of the above are possible, contact the Bridge Project

Center for Community Service and Justice Loyola Marymount University 501 St. Charles St. Baltimore, MD 21202

Prison is a very stressful place. The hard life I was living had a lot of violence. I tattooed my body with loving words. I was living in a prison where the world was a constant battle. I filled my head with a lot of reasons not to change or try something that would help me. I look back at my life now and wish my heart and my entire being could have been the way it is now. I like the warm and peaceful feelings it gives me. I can escape the prison walls whenever I want, just by sitting on the floor and letting it all flow. I know that the man who was afraid to change, has!

San Luis Obispo, CA

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Chris, AriC

The use of various belief systems adds to the purity, and amplifies what is Truth. Walter, Old Folsom Prison, Calif. 

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