

From Canada and England

OUR COMMON DESTINY — UBIQUITOUS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

by Elaine MacInnes

It is an honour to have been invited by the persistence of the Editor to write for Justice Reflections. I initially hesitated to write because my field is so much in the area of happening whereas mainstream contributions to this publication are theological and conceptual. I feel that what I have to say might not be of interest. Nevertheless, I eventually relented and offer my contribution in association with my longstanding colleague, Sandy Chubb, who will write elaborating a more pragmatic point of view.

The Personal Connection

I want to write specifically about Oriental religious experience. I am fortunate to be a member of a Religious Congregation, Our Lady's Missionaries in Toronto, Canada. They invited me to go to Japan as my first mission in 1961, where I had the privilege of a three-year study of that country's language and culture. I lived there for fifteen years, much of it under an Oriental prayer master who was a spiritual giant, and afterwards was given the opportunity of returning to Japan almost annually for another fifteen years to complete the long *koan* study which is traditional in Zen. Also I was afforded the opportunity to teach both in and out of prisons this wonderful 'Way of the Circle.' The circle is often used as a religious symbol in the Orient because it is seen as perfect, with no beginning or end. The great Japanese Zen Master Dogen says: 'The moment you begin taking a step in the circle you have arrived — and you keep arriving each moment thereafter.'

I will say at this point that there is a multiplicity of religious experiences and admit that I am rather ignorant of most. I will deal with the mystical experience that has no object. The title gives me a natural two-fold divide. First is the Oriental religious experience and second is the way it brings inner freedom.

I was born and raised in the West, in a Catholic family. Religious experience in Christianity is not unknown to me, although it is in our tradition to keep the event private. Our insights are usually for ourselves only. Whilst preparing

this paper, I procured a copy of Evelyn Underhill's little classic, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, where I rediscovered what I already knew, that there are points of convergence between eastern and western mysticism. But that is not the subject of our consideration at the moment. I would also like to mention a kind of restriction we practitioners are admonished to observe. In the stream of Zen to which I belong, it is clearly stated that we do not speak — publicly about the Zen Experience, until after transmission is granted. That permission is accompanied by the mandate that we do not speak from theory; that is, we say nothing that has not arisen from our own personal, confirmed experience. Despite all the hype currently to be seen under the Zen name (I have been in stores recently where you can buy Zen soap, Zen perfume, even Zen sand) from the Oriental standpoint there is nothing new or different about the practice. When people come to me wanting to be a contemplative, I explain that what I have to offer is a package deal, as it were, a bundle of disciplines that are literally thousands of years old. Every practitioner gets the same bundle. The only duty of the teacher is to keep the seeker on track. After that, I say without hesitation or embarrassment, everything else is up to the individual's commitment and God.

You might ask, even though there is no theology or philosophy in the practice, did I not feel strange to have a Buddhist Master confirm an experience as religious? I answer very simply — No! My teacher never concerned himself about my Christianity, nor did he teach any of his Christian disciples the Buddhist religion. His only requirement for a disciple was to be a human being ... perhaps a healthy one, because the practice is tough, physically and psychologically. He often spoke of the fact that we are all born to be mystics, and for the most part, our very humanity has that potential. But like the revered Dogen and many other Zen teachers, there is always the corollary to be considered, that some help must come from beyond as well.

About the experience itself, I was aware that my teacher used set criteria to discern its authenticity, as is the practice in the Church, but he never demanded a Buddhist or a Christian articulation concerning that experience. I think it was about ten years after my opening experience when I had completed the course of *koans*, conundrums which invite an intuitional response, that he asked me one day: 'Do you mind me asking how you as a Christian would articulate that experience you had?'

One last introductory point is that I have to admit being protective of this type of contemplation. Many of the Oriental ways of prayer have been lost

to us; and Zen is fast approaching its demise. My colleagues and I in the Japanese *Sanbo Kyodan*, the stream of Zen to which we belong, have determined to try to keep its authenticity alive in our lifetime.

Overview of Oriental Mysticism

Since I am presenting a discourse on the Oriental religious experience, I feel I want to say something of the religious matrix from which it sprang. It will be no surprise that I have to go back four or five millennia to do so. We do not know when Oriental meditation started, but statues have been found by archaeologists dating back 3500 years BCE, showing that body position used at that time is similar to the lotus position recommended for Zen meditation.

The story of the practice of meditation starts in the religious hotbed of ancient Persia (not Iran), between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. We know that Abraham left the area and travelled west, from where we can trace the three great Semitic religions. We also know about 1700 BCE, Aryans from that area went east, invaded the Indus valley in central India, and subdued the indigenous population there, on whom they imposed their religious ideas. We find their expression in the collection of odes known as the Rig-Veda. Their religion had many minor gods, and was heavy with rituals and external sacrifices, which were gradually realised as being ineffective.

As the Aryans came to know their rituals were not effective, they also came to understand that their myths were not factual accounts of reality, but were an expression of a kind of mystery. However in another way, the mystery worked because it helped people come to terms with the wonder and the terror of existence. There is also a 'not-knowing' in the Orient that has nothing to do with ignorance. Of course the Vedic religion asked more questions than it answered, but it did seem to hold people in an attitude of reverent wonder. In many ways this persists in the Orient right up to today.

The impetus to mysticism was prevalent at an early stage in the Vedic religion because it not only developed a sort of natural reverent awe, but also because people experienced a kind of holy power. They gradually came to see through the experience that this sacred power sustains everything in the universe. The whole world was seen as the divine activity welling up from the mysterious being of this power, the inner life-ing of all existence. It was a wonderful matrix one could easily call one's own.

Whenever a people and culture are suppressed, as happened in the Indus Valley at that time, indigenous religion and culture do not necessarily die, but can be expected to surface at critical times. In the heart of India, there had existed for countless millennia the ancient Indian way of yoga. Although suppressed for centuries, it lay quietly in the hearts and homes of the Indian people. It proved itself as a power that 'yokes' the power of the mind, if I may use the term that gives yoga its name. It therefore sustained the inner power of the people. Thus strengthened, they gradually became dissatisfied with the externals of the Vedic religion forced upon them. They sought to achieve an inner realisation of truth.

At about the same time (the 8th century BCE) the concept of rebirth arose. All over the known world at that time economic and social conditions were changing. Bartering had long been a way of life, and since bartered goods were perishable, each night merchants were moved to visit the temple to 'settle accounts' as it were, both material and spiritual in case the great Grim Reaper came along in any of the various guises.

When coin currency was introduced into transactions, many things changed. Coins would not perish in a typhoon, as would cattle and perishable goods. Coins could also be amassed if kept in a strongbox. So the nightly temple visit gradually petered out, and with it, dependency and humility. The gods became superfluous and merchants became rich and powerful. Influence shifted from palace and temple to the marketplace. Though now wealthy merchants, men still had as their legacy, the considerable spiritual riches of their race, and their departure from depending on the gods was not without trauma. Even then, though gradually, the new rich came to feel they were owed a second chance at life, and so the ideology of rebirth arose.

Karen Armstrong, in her book, *A History of God*, gives an interesting overview. She points out, as might be expected, that inequality and exploitation became more apparent as the pace of change accelerated in the cities, and people began to realise that their behaviour could affect the fate of future generations. We can now see that each region developed a distinct ideology in addressing their problems and concerns, like Taoism and Confucianism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India. The gods were gradually replaced by a religious teacher. Armstrong feels that this was a remarkable assertion of the value of humanity and the desire to take control of destiny. She sees it as the great religious insight of the sub-continent.

During the 8th century BCE, sages began to address these issues in treatises later known as the Upanishads. By the end of the 5th century, two hundred Upanishads had been written. They involved a distinct concept of godhood, found to be intimately present in all of creation. Perhaps many of the readers of this review may have found an affinity with the Upanishads, which remain some of the most beautiful and insightful utterances in religious literature.

I would like to summarise this overview of Oriental mysticism because it is still embodied in the great teachers and fine human beings who have taught and are still teaching this legacy in mysticism and spirituality.

Teachers in Oriental mysticism remain imbued with the same holy power the ancients found in the sacrificial ritual. As Indus people of old, they gradually came to see this Sacred Power as sustaining everything. The whole world was seen as the divine activity welling up from the mysterious being, the inner life of all existence. Its articulation in the Upanishads encouraged people to cultivate a sense of holy power in all things. Everything that happened became its manifestation and true insight or religious experience lay in the apprehension of the unity behind different phenomena. The Upanishads claimed that this experience is a new dimension of our very self, and is the same holy power that sustains the rest of the world. And this One Life, in translation two words in capital letters, is within us and abroad, and IT is essentially divine.

Buddhism

It was into this religious matrix that the founder of Buddhism, the young man Siddhartha Gautama, was born. About the year 538 BCE he left his beautiful wife, his little son and his luxurious home in what is now south-west Nepal, in order to become a yogis and follow ascetic practices that would help him come to insightful experience of this One Life. His zeal knew no bounds and he threw himself into the ascetic practices with great abandon, only to come years later to the sad conclusion that they also made him weak and discouraged. Eventually his humanness demanded attention.

In parallel, one day he was told by his teacher that if he pushed a little harder he could achieve the highest enlightenment by himself. The misstatement — namely that everything depends on us — is abroad ever today. Gautama's ardour immediately cooled. In his heart he seemed to know that he needed some help from beyond and, to borrow from Browning, he found no solace in a goal that did not exceed his reach. We are told in Buddhist

writings that he prayed for guidance, which came to him in the form of a gift, a bowl of sweetened rice and milk. He saw that as a sign to set aside the strict, ascetic yogic practices. He then turned to meditation only, in a way he was later to designate as the Addle Path. On the eve of 8 December, he came to his enlightenment experience in great joy, and people have been walking his middle way to that experience ever since.

Ubiquitous Experience

I am sure you can see the parallels with our Western and Christian religious matrix, which I trust will illustrate why the practice of Oriental mysticism never seemed foreign to me. In any case, people of any religion or none have taken on the practice of Zen, found a true teacher, and come to the same identical experience, at least in kind, if not in depth. Usually the event is made public and an account often published. This is still a custom in a traditional and legitimate Zendo (meditation hall). There are, literally thousands of accounts, some of them predating Christ by 1000 years! Despite the identity of criteria confirming the experience, the accounts are varied, interesting, and very much the product of an individual personality. Even today, when reading accounts my own disciples have written I am often amazed that the articulations can be so varied when they were authenticated on identical grounds!

In any case, a religious experience is a happening. It has a date, a time, and a place, as well as content, although I use that word with caution. The parent of a Religious Experience in our lives is often our ability to experience everything in life. One of my favourite definitions of Zen is that it is experiencing fully at all times. A drawback for us Westerners and Christians is that we see things either as religious or not religious. Teilhard de Chardin and the Bible tell us that for those who have the opened eye there is no such thing as secular. ‘Where can I go to flee from you?’ the psalmist asks. We can begin by experiencing through our senses — tasting our food, smelling the flowers, hearing instead of listening and so on.

To speak of religious experience worldwide is to consider a rainbow of possibilities. To speak of Oriental Religious Experience is to be very specific. It is contained in the Sanskrit word, *advaita*, meaning ‘not two.’ For instance, Oriental teachers would say that our world seems to be divided into two — that which we can see and touch and taste, the phenomenal world; and that which we can’t see and touch and taste, the essential world, the mystical

world, the spiritual world, God's world. In the *advaita* experience, we see that in reality there are not two worlds. There is one. But we have to be careful of numbers. My teacher Yamada Roshi would say there is not even one. Underhill says that numbers have an uncanny power over the human mind. Once you let symbolic characters be attributed to numbers the temptation to make them fit the facts at all costs becomes overwhelming. Sometimes this happens when we use the word one in a prayer experience.

Communion with Living Reality

There are many adequate definitions of religious experience, but I have chosen to use Underhill's articulation. She says that a mystical experience is a communion with a living Reality. In another place, she adds the word *ultimate* and changes the *a* to *the*. A mystical experience is a communion with the Ultimate Reality. In her writing, she often seems to cherish the paraphrase that religious experience is participating in eternal life.

All of these are true for me, but the one I use most consistently is the first: religious experience is communion with a living Reality, or more accurately, communion with the Ultimate living Reality. One of the early steps in my own spiritual journey of understanding the reality of 'living' took place when I was about ten years old. I was born on the old feast of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and subsequently informed of his mental prowess and scholastic writings. One day in a bookstore in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada, I noticed a thick volume entitled Aquinas. I eagerly pulled it down to read. It flipped open to a section treating the Five Ways of demonstrating the existence of God. Pretty heavy stuff for a ten-year-old! But I read the full paragraph.

I recall it spoke of seeing movement everywhere, each one proceeding from a previous movement. In the last sentence of that paragraph, Aquinas proclaimed that the prime mover is called God. That was all I could grasp at that age and I slammed the book shut. Even then I was able to grasp something of that wisdom, and have held the insight of God as power ever since. Eventually, God, the world, and the 10,000 or however many things, all became verbs of a kind; perhaps a gerund is more accurate. It was a great preparation for the practice of Oriental spirituality in becoming a mystic.

Buddhists do not speak of a Supreme Being. They speak of a Sacred Power, which the great Zen teachers use fundamentally. By that I mean that when they say 'movement' they are not thinking only of the Big Bang, but of each and every movement in our daily lives. Listen to one of the great Zen masters

of the last century, Shibayanna Roshi of Nanzenji in Kyoto, a Rinzai zendo, speaking of a realised practitioner. He said, 'So wonderful is his Zen that every movement of his foot and hand is shining with, the Truth' (capital T). So in the practice of mysticism, we often take time to be one with a movement we might be executing. A frustrated American Jesuit from Bangkok complained to me once, asking what the Buddhist monks there were trying to achieve when they served him a cup of tea and then asked him to take twenty minutes to pick it up. It was understandably driving him mad! What were they trying to teach him? They were trying to teach him the important awareness in using the sacred Power in all actions, no matter how insignificant they may seem to us.

Subsequent experiences for me have expanded that concept of God as the Prime Mover, an all present, all powerful, all penetrating, vivifying, stimulating, creative, and transforming Power. The fact of course is, that whatever is said about a mystical experience is inadequate. Also, our ways of describing it may change over the years, but the experience itself does not change.

Inner Freedom — God as Communion

As we grow more committed in our spiritual quest, we gradually become more and more immersed in an overwhelming consciousness not only of the ultimate living Reality of God, but also of our own self within God — 'In God we live and move and have our being.' Yet so much of our Western culture, our education system, and even Christianity itself tends to present God as object, not in 'communion'. This is not bad, but it keeps us a prayer and not a contemplative. It also tends to strengthen the sense of a separate 'I' — our ego. This has led to our present state in which many suffer from a sense of alienation. The stronger the ego, the deeper the sense of alienation.

Francis of Assisi was heard to exclaim in prayer, 'My God, who are you and who am I?' Augustine had said before that this is the only question worth asking. And it is still persistent today. When I acted as interpreter for visitors who came to Japan to see my teacher, and he asked them why they had come such a distance, they almost invariably replied, 'I want to find out who I am.' This inner urge to KNOW (the Japanese use the verb *satoru*) is our birthright.

God's gift to the Orient is coming to know that the fundamental Reality is not two, and that that Reality is always operative in time and space, although we cannot perceive IT with our senses. Nevertheless, IT IS. We long to experience that alive Oneness and assuage the longing is in our heart. So does all Creation.

When I was less than ten years old, I took a second step on my spiritual journey when I broke two thermometers and had two drops of mercury with which to play. I could not believe the strong attachment they had for each other. I had literally to hold them apart so they would not fly. Oddly enough, or perhaps not, when I had my first Oriental religious experience, I immediately remembered that sensation, even though it had transpired forty years earlier and I thought I had quite forgotten it.

A Chinese Zen Master said years ago, 'It's just like two raindrops descending a windowpane. Keep watching and they eventually come together as one.' Many people say they 'feel' those two drops coming together. They understand in some way, what it is to experience one-ness. Recently whilst filming a session in my Zendo, the CBC producer listened to the talk I was giving at the time, and later said that the story clicked for him ... that some little happening had transpired which parallels the two drops of mercury.

A koan Story

Here is the story of a *koan*. Listen and see if something happens to you. The *koan*, No. 35 in the *Mumonkan*, reads:

Seijo and her soul are separated. Which is the true Seijo?

The story of Seijo and her longing-other-self is taken from a T'ang dynasty legend. There lived at that time in Kosshu a man named Chokan. He had two daughters, but after the elder died, he grew to love the younger, Seijo, even more. She was an unusually beautiful girl and had many suitors. Her father selected from amongst them a good young man. Seijo, however, was secretly in love with her cousin Ochu, with whom she had played as a child. In fact, her father has said in jest at one time, 'Ochu and Seijo will make a well matched couple when they grow up. Perhaps they should marry!' This remark made them believe they were engaged, and in the course of time they found they were in love. Thus Seijo, when she was told by her father to marry his choice, was deeply saddened. Ochu, was so distressed when he heard of it, he decided to leave their village, for he could not bear to live anywhere near her.

One evening, he secretly left his homeland by boat, without telling Seijo. At about midnight, whilst rowing away, he noticed a vague figure running along the bank, as if to follow the boat. He stopped to see who it was, and to his great surprise, he saw it was his

beloved Seijo. He was overcome with joy at the truth in her heart and they embraced each other in tears. As they could not now return to Seijo's father, they travelled to a remote country where they were married.

Five years passed and Seijo was now a mother with two children. However she was not able to forget her native country and parents, and daily wished for reconciliation. One day she told her husband of this powerful longing, and Ochu calmed her by saying, 'Let's go back to Koshu and beg your parents' pardon.' When they arrived, Ochu left the boat first, went to Chokan's house and told him the whole story. Chokan was astonished and asked Ochu, 'Which person are you talking about?' My daughter Seijo has, from the time you left here, been sick in bed and unable to speak.' Ochu was equally astonished and replied, 'Seijo certainly followed me and we have lived together in a far country. She has borne two children and is physically very well. If you do not believe me, please come to the port where she is waiting in our boat!' In the meantime, Seijo got out of the boat and started walking towards her father's house. At the same time the Seijo in the house got out of her bed, and started to walk toward the door. When they met, they became one. They became one as they were originally.

Becoming One

That is the story. They became one. Did you feel anything? Well, perhaps not. It takes time and practice to bring the body and mind in sync with the Inner Life-ing. I would like to underline that this inner compulsion to break through our not-two-ness can be cultivated and directed. Not surprisingly, the outstanding virtue admired in Orientals is compassion, because basically there is no 'other'. Every other is ourself. As with all paths of true mysticism though, it requires enormous discipline and commitment. It was always thus. Although a pale version of the present discipline of Zen is still notorious for its rigour, all ways of prayer demand a purgation and the old monastic communities were also tough.

One day, through good practice, good teaching, and faithfulness, when all things are ready, we truly find, by a gift of intuition, that there are not two. We are one. We belong. As Underhill puts it, 'We perceive that our personal life is basically and fundamentally fused with our universal life.' To say

more is to distort. It is just like trying to describe the taste of a cup of tea. You really have to drink it yourself to SEE!

Mysticism within Prison Walls

Anyone can drink a cup of tea and taste it. What I learned from 32 years in the Orient is that any human being can become a mystic. We need only to have a teacher and a commitment. My teacher's own belief that we are born for that purpose, has become a fact before my eyes, not only in my own experience, but also within prison walls.

When we silence the body and silence the mind by becoming one with our breath (*Ruah*) the garbage of years of blocks and prejudices and hang-ups is gradually melted. Then we are free to experience the Sacred Power within. We find it is our very own sacred Nature. This is a direct happening. It is not two. It is a communion in Oneness. We come to this intuitively. It is a moment of great joy, a true mystical experience. Our human spirit truly becomes free, so that we can enter the destiny into which we are all born, that of becoming a mystic.

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A POWERFUL PROCESS AT WORK IN PRISON

by **Sandy Chubb**

I have always had a sneaking sympathy for the prison governor who will have nothing to do with yoga and meditation. When your work includes listening to the fantasies and bizarre ideas of vulnerable people, you may become cautious about supporting a discipline you may know little about.

Some years ago a prison chaplain in the UK invited myself and Sister Elaine MacInnes (who as PPT Director for six years did so much to clarify the Trust's spiritual invitation), to offer a workshop to 80 people, interested outside professionals and some prisoners. He asked us most courteously beforehand if we could avoid using the word 'yoga', as he was not sure how it would be received. There was no problem. We worked instead with the key of the practice — the breath. The workshop went down well and no one was put off. His request came from long experience in prison work where careful use of speech is essential.

After fifteen years with The Prison Phoenix Trust, my own ear for the exactness of language has sharpened — and I try to find words that do not hinder better communication. The Editor of this publication has asked me to give an account of how the divine activity — the inner life-ing of all existence which Sister Elaine talks about in her article — manifests itself through the work of the Trust.

How it all began ...

First though, may I explain something of our history? The Prison Phoenix Trust was formed in 1988 when our founder, Ann Wetherall, was doing some research into mystical experience for the Sir Alister Hardy Institute. She discovered that many prisoners have a spiritual awakening in prison, which opens a door of inner freedom for them. She began receiving so many letters from prisoners; she saw that a spiritual hunger exists in prisons which could be an impetus for inmates to use their time behind bars to see themselves and their actions in a different way. She felt that the breath,

body and mind were perfect tools to help prisoners turn their negative situation into a positive one.

So the Trust was founded to support prisoners in their spiritual lives through the disciplines of meditation and yoga working with silence and the breath. We encourage inmates to establish a regular practice so that in time, they form a new understanding of the relationship between the world of spirit and the world of matter.

As a Christian, I am happy to put it more simply by saying that through the practice of silence, prisoners come to see they can never be separated from the love of God. But 'God' as a word can be a real language trap! So it is preferable to ask prisoners themselves to describe what this mysterious power in us is, which isn't our body and isn't our mind. They have plenty of suggestions: love, soul, nothing, essence, Buddha nature, life — to name just half a dozen. A prison chaplain who attended a workshop once offered 'black hole' — without the slightest connotation of negativity. I liked that.

We work with prisoners of any religion or of none. For men and women who say they have a religion, it is delightful to see how the practice of focussing on the breath and surrendering to the silence within it deepens their faith. Sometimes they are re-acquainted with an abandoned childhood religion. Local Chaplains, Rabbis, Imams, or Hindu priests can then accompany them on their inner journeys.

A young man, nine months on after his release from HMYOI Castington in the North East, put it like this:

'When you're sitting (in meditation), it's hard to let go and take the plunge, to rest your mind, because you've clung to things so tightly for so long. At first everything is turmoil and your grip is so tight. The last thing I wanted to do was let go. But slowly the fog clears and I started to notice and move towards the good things around me. If the surface waves are quieter, less forceful, not only am I happier but I feel I'm in the process of spiritual change. I feel I'm like my small son and we're growing together.'

It astonishes us continually, how beautifully inmates articulate their practice. Half of our work is writing to prisoners, encouraging them with regular correspondence, resource books and newsletters, to establish a daily practice. Half our work is establishing and maintaining yoga and meditation classes in UK prisons and in Eire, and training and supporting qualified yoga teachers

in that work. We have been blessed with many friends among prison governors and these days we work with prison officers too. In fifteen prisons there are weekly staff classes. At the moment, 103 yoga and meditation classes are taught each week to prisoners. A young offender at HMYOI Aylesbury says:

'Our yoga instructor, Hugh, has been such a blessing in our lives. I have now been studying yoga and meditation daily for four months and I am being healed after years of self-abuse. Slowly I am understanding how my mind works and become more spiritually aware of how things are.'

Familiarity with the practice

Familiarity with the practice of silence gradually allows people to experience conditions within themselves which are connected to a cooperative whole. The ache of separation which many live with all their lives, starts to dissolve. One man serving time at HMP Lancaster Castle said:

'My weekly yoga class relaxes me and at times I can feel at one with everything. I meditate for half an hour every day. At first I found sitting in silence daunting — the whole prospect so quiet. Just by me sitting in the silence felt like I was disrupting it with my inner noise and confusion. Now this is starting to abate and I see a purpose. I have found self acceptance of who I truly am and relish meditation now. I sense inside there is a beauty so grand and radiant that it dazzles.'

Some prisoners in the multi-cultural society of prison already have a devotional practice. They often ask at workshops whether their meditation on a piece of liturgy will be compromised. They are delighted to hear we encourage both — but not at the same time!

Although physical stretching and breathing practice blends harmoniously with the observances of a religious culture, the practice of silence requires its own time and attentiveness. They like to hear that when I wake up, when I'm still a bit blurry with sleep, I sit down on my cushion, straighten my back and let my breath claim me — before my mind has got too active. When my meditation is over, I pick up a little daily reading and ponder on a scriptural text. Two forms of prayer — one with words.

The Trust trains qualified yoga teachers to prepare them to establish yoga and meditation classes within prisons. Eight years ago we set up The Prison Phoenix Trust Scottish Link, run by a co-ordinator who is also an experienced

prison yoga teacher to increase yoga classes in Scottish prisons. Last year we set up a PPT Irish Link serving prisons in both the North and South.

Prisons are miserable places where people who are distressed, vulnerable, violent or mentally disturbed, struggle to survive in overcrowded conditions. But human beings wherever they find themselves have a natural pull towards each other. Sometimes prisoners arrive for classes full of despair, anger, scepticism or apathy. The PPT yoga teachers work with silence and the breath in an arena which is bombarded with noise and words. After a couple of hours of stretching and relaxing, inmates are invited to sit for a while in silence.

I wish you could see for yourselves, friends, how silence allows this natural instinct for sociable interaction to assert itself. Whatever state inmates arrive in, after the practice they start talking to each other in a friendly way.

Behavioural change from inside

I remember at HMP Frankland, a group of men, full of the frustration and anger that goes with life in a top security prison, entered the yoga class, exuding hair-trigger tension and animosity. Half of them were wearing aviator glasses — those sunglasses with reflective lenses. (If you were unfamiliar with the kind of defences people adopt as a result of fear in prison, the men could have seemed pretty intimidating!) After two hours of stretching, concentration on the breath, a relaxation session and 15 minutes silent meditation sitting they all looked 20 years younger. The dark glasses had come off and they were chatting and offering eagerly to help clear away cushions and mats. At no time did we invite them to change their mood or behaviour.

So what has been at work here? Teachers have the extraordinary blessing of seeing the sacred in action each week. Sometimes, it seems as though you can almost touch it. In fact, in Brixton Prison people often compete to hold their classes in the room where yoga is held because they say the atmosphere in the room is different.

We encourage teachers to take in flowers, a candle, a stick of mild incense and a little altar cloth if their prison allows it. It is a pleasure to watch inmates' faces ease as they see this small area when they enter the class from the wings. I spent a whole day once with 20 men who meditate in HMP Everthorpe twice a week with a remarkable chaplain. One man asked how eternity is 'empty' if it is so full of things. By chance at that moment,

the candle went out and I found myself asking him whether the candle was still alive? Within seconds, the group had split in two while one side — convinced the candle was alive — tried to explain an un-nameable, inexplicable ‘intuition’ to their incredulous — but listening — mates. As the teacher there, I wondered again, who was teaching whom?

The possibility of spiritual gift

As prisoners become more relaxed in classes, they are able to allow the possibility of letting go of their thoughts as they sink deeper and deeper into their breath. The wheels of their minds which spin all day long, gradually slow down. Sometimes, if those wheels stop altogether — just for a zillionth of a nano second — they are gifted with an experience of IT, of the eternal infinite. Extraordinary! — and a personal blessing beyond belief.

I remember one friend said he was six months into a dirty protest (where in the depths of despair and degradation prisoners smear their cells with their own excrement) at the old HMP Peterhead prison in Scotland — then ‘*suddenly, I wasn’t there.*’ Another friend had a spiritual experience in Maidstone prison in his twenties, which led him out of prison into a lifetime’s work with youth at risk. Now in his sixties, he teaches meditation in HMP Wandsworth.

Prisoners in their suffering are extraordinarily open to the divine power within although not many will express it in this way. This open-ness makes them especially vulnerable. Not only is silence therapeutic and inclusive, it is safe for people with addiction and sex offending histories. And for inmates who may spend hours of their days fantasising in their cells just to survive their sentence, the invitation to give the mind a rest, even for a short while, is very refreshing.

Someone on the prison ship HMP The Weare said:

‘ When I first started my sentence my mind was occupied with thoughts, mostly of hate and self dependence. I did not trust anyone. But since I started yoga and meditation, I have calmed down a lot. When someone annoyed me I used to get in a fight but now I let it fly over my head and I am amazed that I am able to just step back and find a different way of reacting. ’ In a sense, we are not teaching anything. The invitation to become receptive and attentive to the breath speaks to some people, that is all. When our bodies feel fully released, we are able to sit still and allow our minds to be still too.

(Incidentally, stretching and silencing the body is a wonderful prelude to prayer of all kinds.) Gradually prisoners start to feel better about themselves, to sleep better and many come to reduce their dependence on drugs, medication and cigarettes.

For two years now, the UK registration board known as the Open College Network which accredits most prison education, has accredited our work for inclusion in Prison Service programmes under the title 'Self Discipline Through Yoga and Meditation.' Although most classes are taught under the auspices of prison education, some are included in drug rehabilitation or sex offending programmes. Prisoners often become our teachers though, in their dedication, diligence and courage.

Sometimes prison yoga teachers read spiritual texts from world religions which point to God as a living Presence within us. As we all know, they can be inspirational. But the real movement comes from within when IT has had a chance to work, silencing the blocks in prisoners' bodies, silencing the blocks in their minds.

One told me recently that he is a burglar and he was walking down a corridor and the man in front of him dropped his watch. He bent down to pick it up and without thinking, he found himself giving it back to its owner: *'It was a nice piece of equipment too! The bloke didn't even say thank you, but that was cool. I felt good about myself.'* Then he paused and burst out, *'But, what's happening here?'*

What is happening? The joy of our work is simply the unpeeling of that which is already right here. Prisoners are greatly relieved to hear they do not have to add anything to themselves or achieve anything. Or be different, or separate. Sometimes, just a little help and kindness is all it takes to let the obstacles clear, so that our connection with each other and our environment can manifest itself.

And of course, this connection begins with ourselves. Another friend who has now left prison says:

'Before I went to jail I was violent and easily irritated. I had a very bad time there before I discovered your books because I needed help in working things out. Sitting (in meditation) helped me realise that a lot of the barriers holding me back don't exist.

'Silence helps you take control of YOU and find order in the mixed up chaos of everyday life. It introduces you to yourself. It has

helped me feel the sun in my heart even on cloudy days and somehow I've found a strength and confidence inside, a reassurance that everything always works out.'

It is doubtful whether our friend knew of Julian of Norwich's writings when he echoed in his own words her famous 'all will be well', but in the timeless now of his words, there is no separation. Just this. Just this...

*Sandy Chubb is Director of The Prison Phoenix Trust. She joined the Trust in 1989 to teach yoga and meditation to young offenders one day a week at HMYOI Aylesbury and became Director four years ago. She began her yoga practice in 1965 and is a qualified Albion Yoga Teacher and British Wheel of Yoga Teacher. In 1984 she began sitting in zen meditation and in 1993 joined the Oxford Zen Centre under the auspices of the Sanbo Kyodan School, Kamakura, Japan. She now travels to prison establishments in the UK and Ireland, giving workshops to prisoners and prison staff. She coauthored the book *Becoming Free Through Meditation and Yoga* with Sister Elaine MacInnes. This book is sent to prisoners free on request to help them in their daily practice.*

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