



# The World Community for Christian Meditation

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## Prison Ministry and Meditation....

### Meditation in Prison

“I was in prison and you came to see me” (Matth. 25:36).

These Web pages are dedicated to all WCCM members who are already teaching Christian meditation in prison and to those engaged in Prison Ministry around the world who would like to extend their ministries to include Christian meditation.

Experience has shown that meditation in prison is more powerful for inmates if it is introduced as the fulfillment of a preexisting ministry such as Bible studies or restorative spiritual programs. By sharing their prison meditation experiences and by encouraging the inmates to do the same, WCCM members can create a network that strengthens everyone’s personal meditation practice.

These “Meditation in Prison” pages of the WCCM Web site will support the continuing work and dedication of those who minister in prison and encourage those who consider starting such a ministry.

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### Nurturing the Seed of Silence in the Midst of Deafening Noise

**By Caitlin Brune**

Few of us have occasion to reflect deeply on something as significant to us as the air we breathe – our liberty – and yet the ability to move about freely, to associate with whom we please when we so choose, and to be the author of one’s days are yearned-for luxuries for those who live lives in confinement. Several members of our 10 year-old meditation community have had an intimate experience of connecting with men who lack these luxuries, which has given us a newfound appreciation for the capacity of meditation to liberate one’s mind. Over the past two years, several members of our meditation community have facilitated weekly meditation sessions for a group of men serving criminal sentences within Soledad Correctional Training Facility in central California. During this time, our small community of inmate-meditators has grown tremendously, both in the depth of their commitment to practice and in their sense of membership within a broader community of people who use meditation as a tool for awakening.

These inmate-meditators are housed within facilities that occupy a somewhat legendary place among states in terms of their inhumane conditions. In California, more than 172,000 adults

are imprisoned in 32 prisons designed to accommodate 90,000 individuals. Additionally, California's prisons reflect the further travesties of racial inequity and social injustice. Among the nearly 200,000 inmates, 93% of are male and almost three out of every four prisoners (an incredible 73%) are either black, Hispanic, or some other racial minority. [1]

Despite a corrections budget in 2007 of a staggering \$8.75 billion - exponentially more than the GDP of a host of low-income countries – rehabilitative programs within California's prisons are woefully underfunded. According to the California Catholic Conference, the chaplain ratio for California's adult prison population is 1 per every 5,385 inmates. The sad status of California's state budget has been used to legitimate cuts in programs aimed to teach prisoners employment skills, advance their education, and equip them with improved communications' and basic relational competencies, among other types of rehabilitation. Cuts result in "warehousing" – confining inmates to their cellblocks for longer and longer durations of each week. In response to these diverse factors, volunteer-run programs have literally become the lifeblood for men eager to turn their lives around and re-enter society as more whole, healthy, and sensitive human beings.

More than 2 years ago, our small, faithful, longstanding meditation community spawned a group of approximately 10 men and women who have been sharing Christian meditation with men at Soledad Correctional Training Facility, a maximum security prison approximately an hour's drive from our home base in Santa Cruz, California. Once weekly, a pair of team members travel to Soledad to share a 50 minute-long session with the men: 25 minutes of silent meditation followed by time for a prepared reflection and group discussion. For the past year, we have additionally incorporated yoga sessions into our visits once each month, using the practice as a form of "body prayer," another tool for the men's spiritual toolboxes.

Many of the inmates at Soledad are "lifers." These guys have already passed the equivalent of two or three decades behind bars, and many contemplate the possibility of serving that many more years before their release. Though hardened by the circumstances of their lives, we have witnessed time and again as these men exercise openheartedness, humility, and trust in our shared practice of meditation. There's Tao, eyes flickering with intensity as he tells of his life being completely transformed by meditation; stoic, pensive Lee, as deep as a mountain lake, whose questions probe the depths of what it means to be a child of God; Steve, eloquent and self-deprecating, who is an obvious leader and example to others; and Gerald, whose passion for mentoring translates into gentle adjustments to the budding yoga students in the group. These are among the many others who have become our meditation community behind bars.

In 2009, out of a shared desire to deepen and extend the men's commitment to meditation and to foster the type of mutual support that community invariably provides, our team offered its first day-long retreat. On November 5, 2010, a team of eight of us – four men, four women - offered our third day of retreat for men who have chosen to cultivate meditation as a means of deepening their spiritual journey, achieving a more tranquil mind, and awakening more deeply to God's presence in the midst of their noisy, chaotic reality.

The theme for the November 5<sup>th</sup> retreat day was **Meditation & Healing**, a natural extension of topics covered in our retreat earlier this year on the theme of **Forgiveness**. Indeed, forgiveness is a priority concern for many of our regulars; they earnestly discuss its complexity at every opportunity. We have come to understand and try to honor their need to hear again and again that nothing can separate them from God's love. With the men's support and participation (a small group serving as their representatives in the retreat planning process),

we chose to develop the November retreat around the theme of Healing. In so doing, we invited the men to experience more profoundly the healing qualities of silence, of prayer, of various types of breathing and movement, and of community.

As quiet music played in the prison's cavernous gymnasium, men trickled in to collect their nametags, admiring a banner crafted by our team that welcomed each retreatant by name. We did our best to establish an atmosphere of silence within our space; indeed, one man remarked:

*[I]t was as if I was walking into another dimension. The expressions on peoples' faces, the aura, and the presence of the hold spirit were so very obvious. Many of us have been incarcerated for over 20 years and do not have the opportunity to spend time with people who treat us, let alone see us, as human beings. Walking in here today felt like walking into a room filled with family.*

He went on to acknowledge the significance of the climate silence, safety, and trust we had painstakingly tried to nurture. He said that the atmosphere and his interactions with our retreat team members and his peers, ". . . helped me see myself in a better light, gave me more confidence and showed me that there are people who support me in making better choices and living a spiritually productive life."

Approximately 40 inmates shared in the retreat, including our "regulars" from Thursdays and a number of men who routinely attend Tuesday evening meditation and yoga sessions offered by Buddhist volunteers. Indeed, our group has differentiated itself by welcoming and encouraging a spirit of openness and ecumenism as we have built our small community of faithful meditators. Our November retreat day was graced by the presence of the long-time coordinator of the Buddhist volunteers and an experienced yoga teacher familiar with Hindu rituals. We feel that these subtle but significant partnerships model our belief in cultivating strong, faithful practices that promote awakening and our desire to learn with and from various faith traditions even while maintaining our touchstone of Christian meditation.

The day consisted of several prepared talks on the topic of healing and meditation interspersed with periods of silent meditation. We had allocated time for small- and large-group discussion, yoga, *pranayama* (healing deep breathing techniques) and journaling. A member of our team who is a certified spiritual director spent one-on-one time with nine inmates in addition to leading a guided meditation. We closed the day with a healing ritual led by one male and one female member of our team that involved blessing the hands of each inmate and volunteer with holy oil provided by the Catholic chaplain. This ceremony closed with a song especially recorded by the lay deacon of Resurrection Catholic Community, one of the parishes from which our volunteers are drawn. Each man also received a small paper bone – a symbol of the "dry bones" referenced in Ezekiel – with a handwritten, personally signed promise of prayer from a fourth grader at a local elementary school.

At the day's end, the retreatants completed feedback forms, which we have drawn upon previously in planning our retreat day agenda. Several men commented that the day felt like "getting out of jail" and being restored in their humanity. One spoke of being moved to tears, particularly, by the children's thoughtfulness and care. The spiritual director amongst us commented that she was privy to tales of profound transformation that the men attribute to faithfulness in their practice of meditation and participation in our small community.

In closing, we share this excerpt from one of the men's comments on the day:

*In this our third retreat I am again reminded of what a blessing you all are to us. You are the very disciples our Good Lord commended in Matthew 25. I am deeply grateful of your dedication, openness, compassion and willingness to share your time, friendship and wisdom with us struggling souls. I am especially thankful for your sense of **acceptance**, not just tolerance, of each and every one of us. Words are inadequate to fully express my gratitude. Suffice it to say that I will always carry your love and example with me throughout my life.*

***The silences we share in these retreats is precious.** It gives us a brief glimpse into our true peace and helps sustain us in our struggles. The insightful and wise talks from the presenters give hope and strength to those of us who cry out with the author of Ezekiel 37:11.*

We feel deeply humbled by the opportunity to share our lives and commitment to meditation with these men and profound thanksgiving for the chance to bring this experience to other members of the WCCM. May you, too, perhaps be inspired to venture behind bars and have your beliefs, myths, and assumptions held up to the light for potential transformation.

*Caitlin Brune is one of the leaders of the weekly meditation group at Resurrection Church in Aptos, California and a member of their prison ministry team. She's a graduate of Georgetown and holds a Master's in Public Health from the University of California-Berkeley. She is a certified Yoga teacher and currently works as a Grant Writer for various international human rights-focused nonprofit organizations.*

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### **Christian Meditation in the Central Unit, Sugar Land, Texas, USA.**

I am a Certified Voluntary Chaplain in the Texas Prison System since 1994. My ministry started at the Central Unit, Sugar Land, with one on one mentoring, then moved to a mandatory course on self image improvement, a Rosary ministry, a voluntary RCIA program and, finally a voluntary "Christian Meditation Program" which started five years ago.

I am ministering to a prison of about 1,000 inmates with sentences ranging from 5 to 40 years. We have a Chapel and all voluntary programs attract about 70 to 100 inmates. The Christian meditation program attracts 12 to 20 inmates on a weekly basis. Most of the inmates in the program have passed from the anger to the acceptance stage in their spiritual journey. They are more sensitive to the silence than the free world meditators because it is very hard for them to find any silence in their dormitories or at work.

Many start meditation encouraged by the core members and some get hooked and adopt the discipline of daily practice and weekly meetings.

Having suffered so much the inmates find that meditation helps them unload their unconscious and some of them share their experiences, most of the time privately with me. One literally sees the Holy Spirit at work.

We meet every Monday from 7 to 9 PM, the two hour time slot being dictated by the recount cycle. Each meeting starts with the distribution and discussion of the WCCM weekly meditation readings published on the internet. Then we listen to a short talk (no more than 10

minutes) by Fr. Laurence or by other spiritual leaders before the start of the meditation which, at the request of the inmates, was extended to 30 minutes. At the end of the meditation I play music from one of Margaret Rizza CDs and finish by reading a closing prayer. During the last part of the two hour time slot, we do some sharing, answer questions, and listen to an audio conference or watch a video. The inmates like watching videos. I have also built a small library for inmates to borrow books from Medio Media. As meditation is a universal way to be in the presence of God, one has to be ready to welcome different religious traditions. My core group of meditators includes two Jews and two native Americans. This interfaith celebration allows us to inject non-Christian readings and open the minds of traditional Christians.

During Fr. Laurence's visit to our prison Unit, one of the inmates shared his meditation experience with him: "Christian meditation has not only educated me further about God, but has carried me through degrees of spiritual fulfillment beyond any former experience or expectation. So much so, I feel relieved and blessed to finally have found what truly works best for me".

Meditating in prison is quite an awesome spiritual experience for the inmates and me. Even the prison staff takes notice. I feel this is the ultimate spiritual restorative experience to prepare the inmates for the free world.

#### Prisoners

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