



Libero

Meditation in Prison

Volume 2, Issue 1
Autumn 2015



Outreach of **meditation**
The World Community for Christian Meditation

Life Is Beautiful

by James Bishop

I recently saw the film *Life is Beautiful* (1997, directed by and starring Roberto Benigni). I was immediately touched by the charm of the main character, Guido. His humor and outlook on life are addictive, and soon his charm wins him a hand in marriage to the lovely Nora. Together, they have a son, Joshua, and are living happily in 1930s Italy.

Soon, however, the film turns darker. The Nazi Party has come to power and they come for Guido and his son, sending them off to a concentration camp on Joshua's birthday.

To help his son deal with all that is happening without exposing him to the hatred of the Nazis toward the Jews, Guido tells Joshua that, for the boy's birthday, they are participating in an elaborate game, and that the winner gets a real-sized tank. Guido perpetuates this charade throughout their entire imprisonment, even inventing a point-system for co-operation with "the men who yell."

Guido pretends to translate the Nazi guard's instructions from German to Italian for his son: "The game starts now. You have to score one thousand points. If you do that, you take home a tank with a big gun. Each day we will announce the scores from that loudspeaker. The one who has the fewest points will have to wear a sign that says 'Jackass' on his back. There are three

ways to lose points. One, turning into a big crybaby. Two, telling us you want to see your mommy. Three, saying you're hungry and want something to eat."

And later, just before the Americans come to free them, Guido tells Joshua, "We've almost won. We have 960 points!"

Though a modern prison does not approach the horrors of the holocaust concentration camps, there are parallels. Of course, both are prisons.

*"Take a
breath,
repeat our
mantra, and
smile because
we've almost
won."*

While watching the film, I was reminded of the other men who shared the prison with me for ten years. Some lived the reality of prison every day. They knew where they were, and they had their feet firmly rooted in the reality of their deprivation. Others were just living life, seemingly unaware that they were being deprived of basic freedoms at that very moment.

I was one of the latter, but not because I was unaware of my

Inside...

Life is Beautiful..... 1

A Change in My Life.... 2

Why I Meditate..... 2

Words of Witness..... 3

The Last Word..... 4

surroundings. Rather, I noticed very early in my incarceration that life in prison was a lot like life outside of prison. There are always things in life that will imprison you in some way, that will deprive you of something. School, work, a long line at a movie theatre or restaurant, we are always in some kind of prison.

Life goes on wherever you are, but it's easy to get muddled in the prisonness of the situation, the little things in life that bother us, that keep us from experiencing our freedoms. Meditation gives us the clarity to see each situation for what it is, and helps reduce our stress. We can more easily deal with our current situation, whether we are in a prison or a long line at the theatre. And we can take a breath, repeat our mantra, and smile. Because we've got 960 points and we've almost won. •

A Change in My Life

By Daniel Fox

Inmate, Adelanto, California

When I think about my experience with meditation I think mostly of what it has given me over the years: peace, love, and compassion. I remember that I used to think meditation was solely a Hindu or Buddhist idea. When I read people like John Main, Thomas Merton, and John Michael Talbot I found out that meditation is in Christianity and Judaism. I found out that the church fathers spoke on meditation and how to practice it. Once I learned more and more on meditation and the techniques, I started to meditate on my own, mostly in the mornings. Once I started to meditate I felt a change in my life by experiencing peace of heart during the days I meditated. I also would gain better understanding of the scriptures on those days. I was able to experience God more in those quiet minutes than any other time of the day. I have learned to recognize God's voice and it has helped me to change my life. I am able to show more compassion to those around me and to deal with my inner thoughts better.



Meditation has helped me to understand my purpose in life and helped me to become a better person. I am able to love those around me even if they do things that I really wouldn't like. I learned that meditation has roots in Christianity and Judaism and that it's not just a Hindu or Buddhist idea. To me, this helps us get closer to God by seeing the things we as people have in common with each other. Meditation is something I enjoy and look forward to in the mornings when I start the day and in the evenings when I end my day. •

"In prayer, come empty, do nothing."

-St. John of the Cross

Why I Meditate

by David Schubert

Prison Volunteer

I have been volunteering in Prison ministry for about 15 years, the last five of which have involved Christian meditation as taught by John Main, OSB. In general, the overwhelming response from the inmates who participate in Christian meditation has been positive.

I have two hours set for meditation time, but seldom use more than one hour. Recently in one meditation session with inmates I tried

something new – for the first 15 or 20 minutes we did lectio divina using the parable of the prodigal son. I read the parable out loud three times with a two, three, or four minute interval of complete silence between each reading allowing all of us to reflect silently and privately about the meaning of the parable for each of us. At the end of the last period of silence, we had 20 minutes of total silence which we spent in the normal meditation method of using a mantra as taught by John Main. At the end of the 20 minutes I asked if anyone had any comments. Usually when I ask this, no one makes a

comment. One inmate on the first row made the simple comment, "That's the deepest I ever went."

Since this method seems to work so well, I now use it every time I lead the inmates in meditation. The normal format of the meditation session is to begin by listening to a five to ten minute CD teaching by either John Main or Laurence Freeman, followed by the lectio divina described above, followed by 20 minutes of silent meditation using a mantra.

Another inmate told me he really enjoyed the meditation sessions

Continued on Pg. 3...

... Continued from Pg. 2

because of the silence. He said it is practically never silent in the prison.

I am 77 years old and began my meditation experience at age 18 doing lectio divina for six years. I found this to be a wonderful foundation for my spiritual life. When I was in my early 30s, I went to a workshop by Thomas Keating and began doing centering prayer for 20 to 30 minutes a day. I did this for a couple of years, but since my job required a lot of overtime, I could no longer find the time to meditate.

I retired about 14 years ago and began meditating again. I discovered Christian Meditation as taught by John Main about ten years ago and began meditating twice a day.

Why do I meditate? I do it to make Jesus the center of my life. How successful am I at that? I do not know and do not worry about it. The most important thing I learned from John Main and Laurence Freeman is, "Do not evaluate your meditation. Just do it every morning and every evening."

The second most important thing I learned was to not worry about distractions. To be perfectly honest, 97% of all my meditations are total distractions. I am conscious of saying my mantra for only about one or two minutes during each 30 minute meditation. My mind is constantly going off into la-la land or onto some project I am working on. Every time I notice I'm not saying my mantra, I just begin saying it again. It does not bother me in the least. I show up and I

meditate as well as I can. I just leave the results up to God.

What has meditation done for me? I'm not really sure. I may be calmer. I may be more centered in Christ. I have noticed that I can focus on Jesus being the person I'm talking to more than I used to. •

*"Don't
evaluate your
meditation.
Just do it
every
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every
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Words of Witness

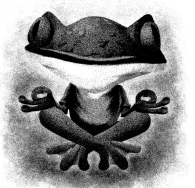
From patients in a correctional facility mental health treatment center who meditate.

I am a person that has high anxiety every day. Even with medication there still is a lot of anxiety that flows through my body. I always hoped I could find something that would help me. I used to try sleeping for a couple of hours, however my anxiety was too high for sleep. I've been in jail now for 8 months and I am happy to say that since I have been meditating for the past two months it has had a huge impact on me. I am able to calm down when need. I hope more people learn this."

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"Before I begin to tell you what meditation has done for me I will tell you a bit about myself. I am 25 years old and am serving a fifteen month sentence for fraud and break and enters. This is my second time in jail; my first was when I was eighteen for an armed robbery. I was sentenced to 4 years in federal prison. Both times coming to jail has been because of a drug addiction and because I've never had faith in my life or the strength to believe things can be better. When I came to this place I made a few friends and they were already involved in chapel service and meditation group. They told me I should come along. I started going and sat there and took it in and it allowed me to feel relaxed and free. That twenty

minutes of meditation and the silence gave me time to free my mind. The second time I went it started to make me feel spiritual. It's like when the silence takes over it allows God to become a part of my life. It felt so wonderful to me to have meditation in my life that I began doing it alone in my room every day. Also along with meditation, prayer has become very important to me morning and night. Since I've started doing meditation and prayer I feel more in tune with myself.. I feel more in tune with myself more free from all the hurt and pain I've been through in my life. For that I am grateful to have been shown how to meditate." •



THE LAST WORD

by James Bishop

*International Coordinator for
Meditation in Prisons*

It's been almost a decade since I first met Fernando. He was bunked across from me, and seemed to always be exercising, but unlike most prisoners, Fern (as I call him) wasn't covered in tattoos. We made an improbable pair.

After I was released from prison Fern introduced me to Helen. Helen is in her eighties and lives in Bakersfield, here in California. She's not able to get around like she used to, but while many people her age spend their time enjoying the sunset years of their lives, Helen chooses to spend her time writing letters to prisoners.

I am constantly amazed at the generosity of people. Perhaps it's because I sometimes allow myself to be tainted by the darker side of the news. And having been in prison, I saw much of the darker side of humanity. I saw the things that we are capable of perpetrating

against others. And it deeply saddened me.

But what I've come to realize is that in the darker moments of our lives, God provides a glimmer of sunshine, people who surprise us by their humanity.

I write letters to Fern and up to twenty other prisoners every week. I try to be encouraging and to help them in any way I can. It's not an easy thing to write these letters because memories of my own incarceration come flooding back to mind, sometimes memories that are not very pleasant. But I know that these men and women who feel trapped in the dark world can find peace and hope

Meditation is a gift, and those who regularly meditate know this. But unlike a physical gift, we can give this gift away, and still have it for ourselves. By sharing meditation with others, We can share the peace we've come to know with others who so desperately need it.

Helen can't go into prisons to visit

with the inmates, so she writes letters. But more than that, Helen sends me postage stamps to help me send letters. Her kindness extends beyond her own actions and touches so many lives.

We may not have time to sit down and write letters to inmates, and we may not have time to go into the prisons ourselves to teach meditation. But there are other ways we can help. Support of the World Community for Christian Meditation can come in many forms. If you'd like to help with writing or visiting prisoners, visit wccmprison.org and select the Contact Us link. We'll be happy to show you how you can help us. If you'd like to help with a contribution, visit wccm.org and select Donate. Your assistance will help prisoners all over the world find peace and healing. Thank you. •



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Libero publishes letters from inmate meditators around the world to encourage those struggling with meditation in prison and inform those on the outside of the challenges with meditating in prison.

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