

*A Meaningful Life  
Requires  
Meaningful Effort*

Part IV: Doing Time the Right Way

Volume III: Making Spiritual Health  
a Priority While Incarcerated

Scott Brooks Jr.

## A Meaningful Life Requires Meaningful Effort

Also by Scott Brooks Jr:

*365 Meditations on the Kolbrin*

*A Soul Call from Prison*

*A Meaningful Life Requires Meaningful Effort*

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A Meaningful Life Requires Meaningful Effort

*To all the Old Heads Who Showed a  
New Fish the Ropes*

## Introduction

Though I chose this edition to introduce my *New Fish Companion Series*, and will eventually, offer it as a free e-book on my website, it is the sixth of seven books designed to help the newly convicted adjust to federal prison. Since this installment is the only one in the series with a spiritual vibe, once I get the site up and running, I will provide it at no charge as a service to inmates and their families, and as a way to say thank you to all the people who helped me survive what many would consider hell on earth. I truly believe the ideas in this book can make your stay in Club Fed more bearable. For that matter, they can make *anyone's* life better, regardless of external circumstances. So, please enjoy it, even if you've never spent a day in custody.

Take any basic writing course, and the first thing they will tell you is to write about what you know. That advice made this series inevitable. After spending twenty-two years, eleven months, and eighteen days in federal custody, you could say, I know more than most people selling their expertise to the recently convicted.

I'm not the first to cover this subject. Many people have gotten into prison consultancy in the past few years. Kevin Hart and Will Ferrell even made a funny movie about it, but don't worry, my advice will never include a suggestion to submit on your knees in a bathroom stall.

A new bar got set in this industry when word spread that Mossimo Gianulli and Lori Loughlin supposedly paid a firm \$100,000 to prepare them for the short sentences both served in minimum security federal camps. I'm not sure how much value you could expect for that whopping sum, but I'm confident I can provide more bang for your buck than those two got.

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Today, the top people in prison consultancy, drawing the biggest fees, seem to be ex-politicians or men and women who once worked for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. These retired wardens and such may be familiar with life in a penitentiary. They may even be able to offer practical advice, but there is only one way to *know* what doing time is like.

If you are facing a stretch behind the razor wire, I suggest you seek insight from someone who has been there, and not from a guy who showed up for an eight-hour shift, then went home to dinner with the fam. That person only can provide an outsider's perspective.

They don't know what it feels like to be all alone in one of the most hostile places on Earth. They've never had to fight the claustrophobia caused by a months-long lockdown in an 8 X12' cell. They've never experienced a "civil" death where even your loved ones begin to think about you in the past tense.

If you are about to go to prison, and felt compelled to read this book before self-surrendering, you probably don't embody the typical criminal stereotype. I doubt you have jailhouse tattoos, large muscles honed on the rec yard's weight pile, or the hardedged "stank face" many cons project as a warning to others. Maybe you've never been in trouble before, and even postconviction, you don't think of yourself as a criminal.

You might be educated, maybe even a professional in your field, and while normally functioning at a high level in society, this predicament makes you aware of social skills you desperately lack. Maybe you have doubts you're tough enough to face the coming ordeal.

If so, don't worry. I had a difficult learning curve in the beginning too. I came from a loving home with committed parents. Unlike many convicts, I got arrested during my final semester as a senior in college. Though I thought of myself as an

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alpha male before incarceration, I still felt a lot of fear when I first got locked up.

To survive in there, as a twenty-three-year-old, white kid with little street experience, I had to figure out the unwritten rules pretty fast. I was lucky to meet a few cons in county jail who had done previous federal bids. These “old heads,” in prison slang, taught me critical etiquette to avoid trouble. Through them, I learned to cast a small shadow, stay out of the way, and do my own time. I also discovered how to operate within the Federal Bureau of Prisons, dealing with staff and filing paperwork when necessary.

I managed to get through two decades with only one incident report (a *shot*, a write-up for breaking prison rules). I was able to walk away from most confrontations and only got into a handful of fist fights. My worst experience involved an eighty-man brawl where my *car* (a group of homies from the same geographical region) were outnumbered three to one. This incident left me injured, but I didn’t need hospitalization and recovered completely in about a month.

This series culls its information from the advice I give clients in my private consulting business. I wrote these books as reference guides to those who’ve purchased my services. I also intended them for worried family members who would like to offer encouragement to loved ones doing fed time. I hope my writing answers questions and eases anxiety. Finally, since I’m aware many cons won’t be able to hire my company, I still wanted to give them access to this information.

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Most of the installments in the New Fish Series teach the freshly convicted what to expect during the transition from freedom to a

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federal prison. They explain the proper behavior needed to fit in with other convicts. They also teach the proper procedures for dealing with uncooperative Federal Bureau of Prisons' staff. Mostly, these volumes cover the relationship between a federal inmate and his environment.

This book, on the other hand, has a theme which focuses on the personal relationship between a convict and his mind, body, and spirit. It teaches inmates how to cope with the stress incarceration places on the individual. Following the advice in my other books, the newly convicted should be able to minimize the threat from other inmates and never make unintentional mistakes that could ignite violence. This book has a different goal. It will explain how to decrease the threat from the time itself: the idle hours, the loneliness, the separation from loved ones, the guilt, the regret, the lowered sense of self-worth, and feeling like your life is being wasted in that cold place.

To be clear, I'm not a therapist, MD, or a guru with a glowing halo. This book, as well as the others in this series, are not intended as medical or legal advice. If you are having thoughts about harming yourself or others, please send an email to your facility's psych department via TRULINCS. They will set an appointment for you with a psychiatrist or other appropriate staff member.

Although, I can't offer you professional advice or provide treatment, I can relate to the experience you face. The techniques and exercises in these three volumes helped me survive twenty-three years in federal prison with my sanity intact. I believe they can improve your stay in Club Fed too.

*Doing Time the Right Way* has a Three-Part Strategy. *Volume I* focuses on mental health and provides you with unique advice so you won't make the same mistakes many other inmates do concerning idle time, dark thoughts and handling long-distance

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relationships. A bored mind tends to go negative. An unmotivated mind tends to lose self-worth.

*Volume I (Mental Health)*, also emphasizes the importance of proactive routines. They reduce the idle moments when the mind tends to wallow in regrets about the past or worries concerning the future. They give inmates structure to their days and something to look forward to besides the normal daily monotony. A good routine helps the time pass and leaves a convict with a feeling of accomplishment.

*Volume II (Physical Health)* covers an element essential to any proactive routine: a physical regimen. Drawing from my experience as an American Council on Exercise (ACE) certified personal trainer, two decades teaching yoga, and training Keichu Goju Karate for over thirty years, I created exercise routines which take into consideration the limits imposed on prisoners concerning scarce equipment, limited space, and non-sensical rules pertaining to exercise. Physical activity provides benefits in equal measures to the mind and body.

No one can feel happy in a sick body. As a prisoner, you have to make physical health a priority. In the best of circumstances, inmates receive subpar medical treatment. A con has to be proactive towards physical health. *Volume II* provides a plan for that. Using it, you'll have the opportunity, like many other fit convicts, to leave prison preserved with quality years ahead of you to make up for the ones lost.

*Volume III* (This volume) gets a little deeper. Most prisoners enter custody dealing with heavy negative emotions. They feel anger, self-hatred, guilt, and tremendous anxiety. Unfortunately, most bottle it up, keep it inside, and never share their feelings with others, but they still feel them. They simply choose to suffer in silence. But some, the introspective ones at least, question their lives, where they ended up, and how bad things turned out.



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These crave a new start. They seek, if not redemption, at least more meaning in their lives.

*Volume III (Spiritual Health)* takes a look at what I used to overcome the guilt I felt for the things I had done. It describes my discoveries regarding how to live a meaningful life in prison. Using these ideas and techniques, I was able to release the self-loathing I clung to as a young convict. With them, I transformed my prison experience into something I now look back on with almost as much gratitude as regret.

I understand firsthand how helpless an inmate feels. I also know there are ways to empower a life while in custody, ways to find purpose in that cold place. This book covers the subject in detail.

The concepts discussed here would benefit *anyone* who applied them, regardless of whether they've ever seen the inside of a federal facility or not. Unfortunately, with spirituality, most people have little interest in it when their lives are going well. It usually takes something like a bad diagnosis, an unfaithful spouse, or a judge banging his hammer before a person decides to look inside.

Prisoners meet that requirement in a big way. For many, serving time will be the worst experience they ever face. People in desperate situations tend to be more receptive to new ideas, especially when those ideas promise to reduce pain, restore hope, and make incarceration suck a little less.

This isn't a religious book. Believe what you want. I won't endorse one religion over any other here. Honestly, I'm not very religious myself. Regardless, I encourage you to use these practices to enhance your faith if you have any. Use them to bring your life meaning even if you have no faith whatsoever.

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The concepts covered won't offend your sensibilities regardless of how you do or don't pray. Most ideas here can be found in any holy book, whether you prefer the Bible, Koran, Torah, Bhagavad Gita, Tao Te Ching, or something else. Although these concepts are simple, they will change your life.

For incarceration to become a meaningful experience, for that matter, for *life* to become a meaningful experience, you have to do something meaningful with it. I'll share the tools I used to find meaning in mine as I spent half my life behind the razor wire.

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Again, this is the sixth installment in my *New Fish Companion Series*. These books and videos cull their information from the advice I give clients in my private consulting business. I wrote them as reference guides for those who've purchased my services. I also intended them for worried family members who would like to offer encouragement to loved ones doing fed time. I hope my writing answers questions and eases anxiety. Finally, since I'm aware many cons, especially those not afforded pretrial release, won't be able to hire my company, I still wanted to give them access to this information.

My inspiration for writing started after researching other prison consulting firms. Most offer a very shallow approach, and some seem more like scam artists than professionals offering true value to clients. You would be surprised how many of these so called "experts" have never been in federal custody or only spent a few months at a minimum-security camp. Some are convicted child molesters who did their entire sentences in protective custody.

In answer to this lack, I created a comprehensive system addressing every question first time offenders need answered,

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including many they wouldn't even know to ask. To do a thorough job required me to create a Five-Part Strategy. The resulting system is what I use to prepare clients for federal incarceration. The sheer amount of information could not be covered justly in one installment. Here's a synopsis of the five steps:

### Part I: Post Conviction through the First Ninety Days in Federal Custody

This will be the most stressful time, with the most stuff going on for first time offenders. I'll cover the post-conviction process, including the Presentence Investigation with a federal probation officer. The piece of advice I offer regarding RDAP eligibility alone more than compensates for the price of this information package.

After that, I'll explain what to expect during the first three months in prison. I'll help you avoid common mistakes new fish make and show you how to get as comfortable as the experience allows in a short amount of time. Above all, I'll teach you how to cast a small shadow and not step on toes unintentionally.

### Part II: Prison Etiquette

In every social interaction with people, there are unwritten rules to learn and social skills to develop. Prison is no different.

In the free world, rude behavior, breaking your word, telling a lie, or damaging the property of others might cost you a friend or the chance at a second date. At worst, you'll get shunned by a group of peers. In prison, the consequences can be more severe. This

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Part covers the basics about fitting in, learning how to avoid tension, conflict de-escalation, and making safety a priority while serving time.

### Part III: Learning How the Federal Bureau of Prisons Works

While inmates lose many rights when they go into custody, they don't lose all of them. While many prisoners feel overwhelmed by the prevailing sense of helplessness inside, they aren't powerless. This book teaches the recently convicted how to use the FBOP's rules, regulations, and procedures to protect themselves, and take advantage of the few privileges available to convicts.

### Part IV: Doing Time the Right Way

Since prison can be one of the most stressful experiences a human can go through, this part teaches convicts how to cope with life behind the razor wire. It draws on techniques that helped me survive so long in federal prison. To cover this properly, this part required three volumes:

#### Volume 1: Making Mental Health a Priority

As I mentioned earlier, this volume teaches effective techniques to combat the mental stress incarceration creates. It also offers advice to help avoid the typical mistakes convicts make

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regarding idle hours, wasted time, dealing with long distance relationships, and preparing for release. Most importantly, it gives detailed instructions for creating proactive routines to combat the feeling that your life is being wasted while you serve time.

### Volume 2: Making Physical Health a Priority

Again, this one focuses on helping an inmate stay as healthy as possible while he or she serves time. It offers creative routines that take into consideration the limited equipment available inside a federal facility. Armed with the knowledge, a convict can leave prison young and vibrant with some good years still ahead.

### Volume 3: Making Spiritual Health a Priority

This book, *A Meaningful Life Requires Meaningful Effort*, focuses on spiritual health. I consider it the most important in the entire *New Fish Companion Series*. I couldn't have gotten through all that time without a meditation practice. It helped me cope with guilt. It helped me become a better man.

Here, I teach the ways I found meaning and purpose while doing all that time. It speaks to the religiously minded and agnostic equally.

## Part V: A Fresh Start: Reentry Options Available Upon Release from Federal Prison

Aside from the first months in custody, the most stressful time for many inmates comes when they near release. Though every person in custody spends many moments dreaming about the day he or she gets to leave, it can be an anxiety-filled experience when it finally arrives. This part explains home confinement, halfway house placement, rules, and relocations, as well as federal probation. It includes reentry prep and covers all the resources available to help ex-cons get back on their feet. It also covers special physical and mental health considerations unique to the recently released and potential solutions to these issues.

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This may come as a surprise, but with the right mindset, and a little guidance, prison ain't all bad. Sure, inmates dream about their release every day in there, but incarceration provides leisure time like few other life experiences. With the wrong outlook, all those idle years can drive a person crazy, but with an optimistic attitude *and* a plan, a felon can change his or her life for the better, gain skills, learn interesting subjects, get in great physical shape, pick up a talent or hobby, and most importantly, develop inner fortitude by learning how to rise above circumstances and face adversity with the correct approach.

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## Chapter 1: Suffering May Suck, but It Also Has Purpose

If you're in FBOP custody, you probably already consider yourself an expert on suffering. The people that run those facilities seem to dedicate all their time to finding new ways to frustrate inmates. The pandemic gave them all the excuses they ever wanted to cut programming, keep you locked down for years at a time, and invent new, arbitrary, non-sensical rules that always emphasize symbolism over substance, with the slogan: "As long as you look like you're doing your job, you don't actually have to do it."

I made federal prisoners the target for the *Doing Time the Right Way* series, and they may be the most receptive market for this book's message, but it feels like humanity, as a whole, needs it pretty bad too. Doesn't the world feel like a pretty dark place to be living in right now? Incarceration certainly heightens that emotion, but many people in this country seem convinced America is on a downward spiral. You can't call a few buddies to catch up without hearing about some real-life suffering at home.

This guy's kid overdosed on fentanyl. These two lovebirds are calling it quits. What's-his-face has cancer. Such-and-such lost his business during COVID. Do you know how much gas costs? Did you hear about the shooting at that school? Does our president have Alzheimer's?

Suffering has always been part of the human condition. Before enlightenment, Prince Gautama obsessed over the pain it caused humanity. After reaching nirvana, the Buddha considered the idea so important, his First Noble Truth stated simply: "Life is Suffering." This has been the case as long as people have walked this planet.

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So why do things feel especially bad right now?

Maybe modern communication keeps us informed regarding the dark stuff we used to be blissfully ignorant about. Twenty-four-hour cable news certainly doesn't do us any favors in that regard. On top of all that, getting indicted, arrested, and locked up doesn't push anybody's feel-good button.

Still, in many ways, life in America has improved for its citizens compared to two-hundred years ago. Voting rights have been extended to everyone, civil rights too, and even though racism still exists, our country is moving in the right direction concerning it.

People in the lowest income brackets have conveniences, like indoor plumbing, refrigeration, AC/Heating, and internet. The richest folks on the planet in the 1800s couldn't have imagined luxuries like that. Today, our poor people battle obesity instead of starvation.

In general, our citizens are safer today. Some men live their whole lives without having to square up for a fistfight or point a firearm in self-defense. We haven't endured a real war on American soil in 160 years.

As flawed as the US Health Care system is, it's better than decades in the past. People live longer, with better choices. Women have control over their lives. The LGBTQ community lives openly without fear and marries as they please.

So why do things seem so dismal out there? I don't mean just for those looking out prison bars either. People who've never worn handcuffs seem to be hurting badly. They're angry, scared, worried, and filled with hate.

Don't know what I'm talking about? Don't agree? Turn on the news for five minutes. I don't care which flavor you choose. Pick

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the right wing or lib-tard version to rot your brain. Either way, I guarantee you'll be feeling one or more of the above emotions by the first commercial break.

We have a mental health care crisis. According to the Pharmaceutical Journal, the number of antidepressant items prescribed over the past six years has increased by 34.8% from 61.9 million items in 2015/2016 to 83.4 million items in 2021/2022. Around 4 million Americans under the age of eighteen are prescribed these medications.

On average, there are 132 suicides per day. Each year, 705 inmates give up by taking their lives. This got so bad a few years back, the Federal Bureau of Prisons had to implement new policies, like no longer allowing inmates at certain prisons to cell alone.

In 2021, 107,622 people died from drug overdoses, and the number rises exponentially each year. Many are being poisoned by Fentanyl when they believed they were ingesting less-toxic drugs like Valium. Mass shootings happen so often, we can barely summon empathy without a double-digit body count.

Many factors create these conditions. The breakdown in the family unit has left children without fathers. Aside from the lost lessons a male role model could provide, how can a kid not have abandonment, self-esteem, and self-worth issues growing up with that hole in his or her life?

Technology shares some of the blame too. The Internet has created as many problems as it's fixed. Even before COVID, social media, texting, and many other new ways to "connect" were isolating people as much as bringing them together. As a result, kids have become socially awkward.

They have difficulty making eye contact. They no longer practice winning smiles. They lack the confidence needed to

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interact in real life. Few belong to true, flesh and blood, social circles anymore.

Thumbs have replaced tongues as the primary speaking organ. Communication has devolved into snappy sound bites, witty remarks, and abbreviations no one under sixteen can decipher. Sometimes, when they can't summon the energy to type, they'll just hit *Send* on a smiling turd and call it a day.

The distance, sitting behind a blue screen creates, makes bullying easier. Consciences callous over, because they never see the pain, they inflict, firsthand. How much do these acts influence school shootings? I don't know, but common sense suggests a connection.

This disconnect and isolation also has created new problems that never existed before. How else could something like *Catfishing* exist? Why is it an ongoing issue? After watching one episode of MTV's hit show, why would anyone with normal self-esteem continue an internet relationship with a stranger who refuses to video chat or meet in person? Yet, this unique mental health problem young people face has guaranteed the show's continued success for eight seasons and counting.

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Real adversity exists in our world. True hardship exists. People suffer, but what makes the situation so much worse is that most folks in our country don't have the proper coping mechanisms to deal with the pain life is sure to inflict.

Some coping mechanisms people favor don't do anything but magnify the current discomfort and guarantee future suffering too. The worst example of what I'm talking about is the *victim*

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*mentality*. Too many people use it to beg for sympathy, handouts, or as an excuse for inaction. Justifying victimhood has become something like a competitive sport online. These types use all their energy to set themselves apart from others, but in a strange way.

They use the difficulties they face, not as badges of honor, but as proof they haven't been treated fairly. Now, it's taking a more sinister turn. There's a growing contingent who tend to believe all rich people are evil and all poor people are victims of forces beyond their control. I agree that some of the wealthy and many in poverty fit those categories, but it isn't true for everyone. Success has been turned into something dirty by these victims who believe deep down they aren't capable of achieving it themselves.

Taking this mindset further, people rarely own mistakes anymore. Few take responsibility for their lives. It's always someone else's fault. This is the common belief among most convicts.

To a person with a victim's mentality, their circumstances suck, because the world is unjust. They never had the opportunities the other guy had. They didn't catch the same breaks. If life was fair, they would be even more successful than all the people they envy.

Even if every excuse a victim makes is 100% true, life can't improve while one wallows in self-pity. Some prisoners bid like this their entire sentences and ruin a fantastic opportunity for self-improvement through sheer inaction. Instead of doing something meaningful, they blame drugs. They blame abusive fathers. They blame cheating wives. They blame rats, harsh laws, ambitious US Attorneys, and power hungry, federal judges.

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Look, I'm not heartless. All these excuses are legitimate. Many convicts suffered as children. Many fell into addiction as adults. Some got crushed with decades as first-time offenders.

But, the problem with people who wallow in the victim mentality is that they spend their whole lives living in a past that no longer exists. Doing that while lying on a steel bunk, night after night, in an 8' by 12' cell is one of the worst, self-inflicted tortures a person could invent. So here is this chapter's dose of tough love: What happened, happened.

It can't be fixed, but all those continued excuses make future failure inevitable. The victim mentality provides a grown-up equivalent to a child's security blanket. It feels safer to cling to the *blanky* and never take risks. These types are too afraid of failure to make any real effort. They would rather make everyone who *is* trying feel guilty about it. The funny thing about this though is that any person who has achieved his or her personal goals would tell you that they learned more from their failures than their successes. With the right attitude, you figure shit out through failure.

Victims want their hands held. Free will and independence don't work like that. Freedom demands a person take responsibility for his or her existence. There's no better place to start doing that than in a jail cell.

The victim mentality has infected our country in many ways. It is at least partly to blame for 50% of marriages ending in divorce. People focus on the wrongs they've endured in the relationship, instead of how they could have given more love, trust, support, and encouragement to their partners.

I read a recent poll that asked people what they thought would make them happy. The overwhelming majority wanted wealth. When asked how they planned to acquire these riches, some hoped for a winning lottery ticket, but the majority were

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waiting for an opportunity to sue. They thought picking lucky numbers a long shot but believed winning a lawsuit to be more realistic. (Ouch, carpal tunnel! Those bastards at Apple will pay for this!)

Is that the new, American dream? What happened to our inventors, innovators, and entrepreneurs? Has society become so degenerate? Today's left-wing agenda seems to capture this sentiment and has put our president in the White House through it. Biden has made unrealistic promises for free health care, student loan forgiveness, benefits paid to illegal aliens, and countless other freebies to create a dependable voting block that can no longer care for itself.

The top wish used to be winning the lottery, but folks have traded up for something that is far more likely to produce a quick payday. The people in this poll live life with fingers crossed, hoping for the opportunity to fleece a successful person out of his or her hard-earned money. This desire has caused malpractice insurance to skyrocket, and it has influenced the country's high medical costs.

People like this walkthrough life feeling *owed*. They see the success of others, and instead of feeling *inspired*, they feel *cheated*. Few have ever thought about how they might *contribute*. They only think in terms of what life has done to them. They never consider their own potential power to change their circumstances through ingenuity and honest effort.

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The *victim mentality* will be a recurring theme to this book. Overcoming it can lead to a life filled with power, purpose, meaning, and hope. Though it sometimes feels otherwise, we aren't victims of circumstances, powers greater than ourselves, or dumb luck. Well, let me put it like this: There's method behind the madness. There's a lesson embedded in the shit we face.



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I know my words may sound insensitive, especially if you're waiting for your trial or just starting a lengthy sentence, but I'm really just trying to make two points here. First, life is suffering. Everybody hurts, even the rich and powerful. We all face sickness, death, fear, agony, hate, greed, and a million other inconveniences.

You never know what's going on inside another person's head. The guy you might be looking at with envy, may be wishing he was you. Lots of famous people wish they could go to a mall without being mobbed. Power creates enemies. Look at the lies and other compromises politicians make to stay in power. How many of them are really happy?

Life is suffering. No matter the circumstances in a person's life, there will be problems. Money can't make them disappear. Beauty can't either. Neither power nor anything else you might desire that is missing from your own can guarantee you'll never hurt again.

Though I dreamed about my release for twenty-three years, I knew my suffering wouldn't end when I got out, I made peace with that understanding. I recommend you try to accept this fact too. Don't expect your life to be pain free. Don't expect incarceration to end early just because you pray for it. Don't expect your pain to end forever when they let you out either.

My second point is: *Suffering has purpose*. You don't just tolerate it, because there's no alternative. It also has some positive things going for it. Mainly, it teaches. My suffering provided the greatest learning experience of my life.

It made me into a man who could endure two decades in federal prison. There was only one way to develop fortitude like that. It educated me to the point that I can look back on incarceration as the greatest learning experience of my life. I still

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wish the experience hadn't lasted quite so long, but when I reflect on it, I feel almost as much gratitude as regret.

I don't believe this world can be, or should be, perfect. I see life as a training ground. It places obstacles in front of us intelligently. Each are problems to solve, adversities to overcome, and duties to accept. We can either become better men by figuring out how to face them with the best attitude possible, or we can act like wienies every time life fails to cater to our petty, insignificant wants.

Bob Dylan used a metaphor that I really like. He said he felt: "As helpless as a rich man's son." A bad father doesn't prepare his children to face the world. Without broaching the subject of God, let's say our struggles are the lessons life gifts us to become better people. With hindsight and the right perspective, you will often look back on your challenges as the greatest blessings in your life.

I don't expect you to feel that way about prison right now, but I would challenge you to stop seeing it as nothing but a setback. Instead, view it as an opportunity. You have been blessed with leisure time like few people ever experience. Without a plan, all that time can crush you, but with a good strategy, you can transform yourself and your world.

Through the practices I've used over the past twenty years, some of which I will cover in this book, I know, not believe, *know*, meaning through actual experience, not faith, I *know* we are spiritual beings. Life has meaning, and we have a greater purpose in these bodies than just accumulating stuff and experiences until we die.

One of the biggest problems fueling all these issues I've been discussing is that we are deeply spiritual beings, but most people live shallow, empty existences. If you want to experience a

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meaningful life you have to do something meaningful with it. Unfortunately, few people, especially all those victims, are willing to make even the simplest changes that might make a difference.

That is why I like writing to prisoners. Incarceration may not have much going for it, but one fantastic thing about getting locked up is how sometimes our biggest failures inspire the most monumental changes. No one absorbs new ideas promising relief faster than someone hurting inside.

Pride also creates an obstacle to change. Nothing humbles a man like handcuffs and orange jumpsuits. Some people need to endure humility before they admit they don't have all the answers.

A meaningful existence requires us to do a few things. The problem with American society over the past three or four decades concerns the fact that people have moved away from the old sources of this instruction, but they haven't replaced it with anything meaningful. Church used to provide it for many. Some got it from wise grandparents, parents, or a rich cultural heritage. These days though, people rarely think about anything deep or mysterious, let alone have an opinion about God, but all the same, they can't figure out why their lives feel empty. They don't see a connection between this and the mental health care crisis in our country either.

I started in the same place. Though raised as a Free Will Baptist, I'm not even a Christian anymore. For years, I was an agnostic or even an atheist depending on how well my day was going. Mostly, I just believed that there was no way to prove the Big Guy's existence one way or another. So why bother? That mindset didn't comfort me much at the start of my sentence though.

Even now that my outlook has changed, I won't push religion in this book. I won't mention God again either. I've practiced

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Taoism for the past twenty years, but I won't try to convert you. So, relax. Instead, I'm going to discuss some simple concepts, and a few techniques, that changed my perspective towards incarceration.

These things gave me hope and inspired me to become a better man. They don't require belief. They won't offend your outlook no matter what religion you like. In fact, they will strengthen your faith and compliment any worship you choose. More importantly, they can still improve your life even if you think religion is bullshit and creationism a myth. So, drop any worries, hang ups, or reticence, and just read.

Mostly, these ideas helped me *appreciate* my life. Life is a gift, even if you have to spend a bunch of it sick, being abused, or inside an 8' by 12' cell. I know firsthand how the stuff in this book can help you see the truth in that statement.

Life is deep. Life is meaningful, but few live meaningful lives anymore. Instead, they waste years with shallow, unfulfilling pursuits.

I have a difficult time understanding how so many Americans covet reality TV stardom. Sure, those actors have what many people crave, what many convicts were chasing when they got arrested, but all those shows feature bitter, unhappy, D-list celebrities who thrive on nothing but conflict. How does that crap dominate the airwaves?

Every episode delivers proof that money, fame, and storebought beauty can't bring happiness by itself. All those housewives do is obsess over meaningless beefs and imagined slights by other cast members. These women can't go out in public without causing scenes, starting fights, or ending the day with self-pitying tears.

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In the same way those women covet Instagram followers liking booty shots, convicts obsess over their release date. Each prisoner knows a specific day and hour when their pain stops and the joy starts. They pin all their hopes on what will happen when they get out.

This usually causes two problems. First, by believing happiness won't start until your sentence ends, you guarantee each day in custody hurts more than it should. It also creates unrealistic expectations for life after federal prison.

Most people have never seen the inside of a correctional facility, but how many of those straight and narrow squares are truly happy? Freedom definitely beats incarceration, but isn't enough by itself to lead to a fulfilled and joyful life. After an initial buzz, ex-cons often fall back into the old pattern soon after they get out. No matter how good it feels to walk through the front gate, those initial ecstatic feelings will fade before long.

People who were miserable, ungrateful, complainers in prison rarely change. They might have blamed those bad feelings on incarceration, but they find themselves harboring the same negativity in the free world. Why else would they keep doing the same dumb shit that forces them to come back again and again, doing a life sentence on the installment plan?

If release won't bring lasting joy to a prisoner, how can he or she find it? How does one go about experiencing a deep and meaningful life? Can it really be done in prison?

Honestly, these things work better for suffering people, because those types crave change the most. The process I'll layout in this book has three simple steps:

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Step One: Clean Your Heart and Head

Step Two: Look Inside

Step Three: Look Outside

I've used these concepts to bring my life meaning. It changed my perception of prison while I endured it. They still guide my life as a free man. If you apply them, I guarantee you will experience the best kind of positive change too.

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## STEP 1: CLEAN YOUR HEART AND HEAD

Prison inspires self-reflection like no other place. Cons that have the right attitude use the time to improve. They fix the flaws leading to incarceration. They prepare for a more successful and honest life after release. They make amends with family and others when possible.

I've talked about self-improvement throughout Volumes I and II of the *Doing Time the Right Way Series*. In the first, I emphasized *self-improvement* as a means to cope with mental stress. I covered the importance of having a daily routine to stimulate the mind in a productive way, fight boredom, provide an outlet for tension, and enhance self-worth with each new thing learned.

In the second volume, the body became the target. For inmates who take improving their physical health seriously, prison has a preserving effect. I've seen cons in their eighties doing headstands and pullups. With a daily exercise regimen, inmates need to visit sick call less often than the rest of gen pop. They have more energy and like what they see in the mirror too.

This volume looks at self-improvement at a spiritual level. In the previous chapter, I said adversity teaches us if we approach it with the right perspective. This section will provide some tools that can help us overcome the suffering life forces us to face and make us better people along the way.

Chapter Two, *Don't Let the Assholes Win*, will focus on clearing the bitterness, hate, resentment, intolerance, and grief from the



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heart. Chapter Three, *Right Thinking* will offer valuable ways to clean the head in the same way. After the initial cleansing, a Spring Cleaning, if you will, the techniques simplify to a quick daily routine to maintain the heart and mind in a state uncluttered with negativity.

## CHAPTER TWO: DON'T LET THE ASSHOLES WIN (HOW FORGIVENESS BENEFITS YOU)

Forgiveness has several elements to explore. The first may cause some pain to consider, because it's not a guaranteed thing from the people we hurt. Depending on the crimes committed, it may be too much even to ask of a victim. Some things a convict just has to accept.

If you find yourself in this position, understand that you may never receive absolution from the people wronged, but that doesn't mean it can't be achieved on any level. Use the remorse to inspire you. Vow never to repeat a similar mistake. Allow the pain it creates to motivate positive change.

Some inmates wallow in regret like a form of self-imposed punishment. They let it crush them, and this mentality prevents them from ever rising above their pasts. Self-pity is just another form of victim mentality. Even though the situation was self-created, the person sees himself as helpless to fix it. So, he doesn't try.

I did this for the first few years of my sentence. I felt remorse for my crimes. I felt guilt for not doing more to prevent the violence that occurred in my case. I hated myself for what I made my family and girlfriend endure.

In short, I wallowed in regret. I did it as some sort of twisted penance. I thought I deserved more pain. I didn't think I could ever fix my wrongs. I let self-hatred prevent me from even trying.

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I would lie in my bunk thinking about my family, reliving the pain and humiliation I had caused them. My daydreams starred my mom crying, while praying for me. Others caused me to picture my dad hunched over, rubbing his forehead, blaming himself for me losing my way. I imagined my girl shifting between sadness and anger as she faced the ruined plans, we had made together, all alone.

The self-hatred arose from some twisted sense of duty. I couldn't stop the people I loved from hurting. Since I had caused their pain, it felt like it was only fair for me to make sure I hurt worse than them. At the time, I don't think this reasoning was fully conscious, but I refused to forgive myself. I refused to move forward in anyway.

With that mindset, I wasted years that could have been better spent balancing the scales. Don't get me wrong. I still don't know if all the good I've done since I've had an attitude change, or even all the good I will do, will be enough to make up for my past, but trial and error have shown me this is a more rewarding way to live. It granted me a sense of purpose and an inner peace that had been missing for all the time leading up to it.

Many cons use the track on the rec yard to think. If you see a guy walking out there by himself, with earbuds thumping, he probably wants to be left alone. Inmates vent frustration like this. They might be chewing on a problem. They may have gotten bad news from home. It may just be one of those days when prison sucks a little more than the others.

One afternoon while I was out there pacing, walking in circles, and reliving those painful, self-defeating thoughts about the people I had hurt, I suddenly had an epiphany. Printed here, it doesn't seem transformational, but it was. Simply, I realized ... I can think what I want.

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My thoughts were my own. I didn't owe them to anyone. Until I voiced my thoughts, I was the only one who knew them anyway, and the people who loved me didn't want me beating myself up on their behalf.

I was under no obligation to recreate this mental hell day after day. This was my life. My thoughts belonged to me. I didn't have to think this way, if I chose not to do it. With a little resolve, I could change my perspective.

I realized the best thing I could do for those I had hurt was to become a better man. I also understood that couldn't happen until I stopped hating myself. With this new outlook, I accepted that the world might always see me as a hardened criminal, but I didn't have to view myself that way anymore.

Part of the self-hatred had been focused on the selfish, self-centered, and egotistical person I had been leading up to arrest. I used people. I allowed my cocaine addiction to fuel greedy behavior. I lied to everyone I knew. In short, I wasn't a good person.

I realized that even though all those judgements were true, continually hating myself in the present for things long past served no positive purpose. I was wallowing in a victim mentality. At this point, I concluded that even though I was powerless to erase the fuckups from yesterday, I didn't have to let those mistakes define my future.

My life began to improve when I finally forgave myself. It didn't happen all at once. I teetered back and forth between forgiveness and more hate for a while. Even now, I still have bad days where the self-loathing wins out for a moment or two, but for the most part, I let yesterday go.

Now, whenever I feel those judgmental thoughts weighing me down, I'll stop and redirect them to something more positive.

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I've done some good stuff since then. I spent years teaching other inmates yoga and meditation. I believe these books will help some people too.

My advice to you, no matter why you're facing indictment or the reason you're in prison, is don't waste your time beating yourself up. Feel remorse. Feel regret, but don't let it weigh you down into uselessness. Don't let it prevent you from trying to make amends.

Forgive yourself. Even if it takes a thousand do-overs, forgive yourself. In the beginning, it might not feel real in the slightest bit. If that's the case, fake it. Just go through the motions until you mean it. With enough repetition, eventually you will.

Seeking forgiveness from others is trickier. It might not be appropriate. Depending on the crime, it could be a terrible idea. Use sound judgment regarding this. As far as contacting people to make amends, start with family members and friends you wronged.

If you have financial victims, focus on restitution as much as you can. You may have a debt you'll never be able to pay back, but do your best. Don't contact your victims. Don't communicate with them at all unless they initiate it, and you want to respond.

If you hurt people, the best you can do is never repeat a similar mistake. Take anger management classes if you need them. Every facility psych department offers them. Use all the techniques in this book to become a better person, and finally, accept your punishment. If you earned it, face it with the best attitude you can summon. I guarantee a mindset like that will minimize the suffering you face in custody.

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The next uncomfortable element about forgiveness to explore concerns others in a different way. For healing to begin: emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, we have to forgive those who hurt us. For some, this may seem like too much to ask.

Most convicts have been through some shit. As I said earlier, life is difficult for everyone, but many prisoners have endured physical, sexual, emotional, and every other flavor of abuse you can imagine. Often that pain came at the hands of loved ones, even parents. I met a bunch of guys inside who got ratted out by brothers, dads, cousins, and wives.

I had one cellie whose dad picked him up and stuck his head in a ceiling fan for getting a *D* on his report card. Another's step father locked him in a closet for days without food more than once. I won't rehash the stories I heard about childhood molestations.

As bad as that stuff is, maybe you faced worse treatment, maybe not. Regardless, this isn't a competition. There's no cutoff for certain acts. Though you may have suffered terribly, this truth about forgiveness still applies.

The only way to recover from *any* painful element in your past is to let it go. Forgiveness provides the method to do that. Otherwise, that pain can make you a victim, continually defining your future. It will limit you. It will provide a ready excuse for self-doubts, inaction, and failure.

Maybe you think the people who hurt you don't deserve your forgiveness. It's okay to feel that way. The absolution isn't for them anyway. It's for you. If you don't feel capable of it, you don't have to tell them you've granted it to them.

This type of forgiveness is about cleaning yourself. It's about not letting the assholes win. Hate, anger, bitterness, sadness, regret, and self-pity are poisonous. They burden your heart

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unnecessarily and make it difficult to trust others, to truly love our partners, or to feel compassionate toward the suffering of others. Those emotions weigh down your soul. They limit your happiness. They cause stress on your mind. They can even sicken the body with high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, and fatigue.

It's amazing the weight forgiveness cuts loose. It frees up space inside for better things. It helps the heart open and makes room for love to grow. It redirects a person's perspective from the past to the future.

You can still use what happened to motivate, but instead of it motivating inaction, let it inspire the opposite behavior. If you were victimized by bad parenting, vow to be a better one to your kids. If your heart got broken by a cheating wife, promise to be faithful, supportive, loving and attentive to the next woman that shares her life with you.

Become tougher by overcoming the pain. Instead of living as a victim, act like a survivor. Wear your hardships like a badge of honor, not something that limits your abilities or opportunities.

Think about how powerful an act like that is to the people who tried to hurt us. Not only does it prove they didn't break our spirits, but it made us so strong we can forgive them for their weakness. There's no greater way to shame the villains in our lives, and it's the best way to influence change in them too.

Seeking revenge wouldn't make them want to be better people. It would only continue the cycle. They would rationalize their anger and retaliate again, but when you forgive, you suck away all the negative energy fueling the exchange. It may even make them pause long enough to feel regret themselves.

If you don't know how to get started with this, write a letter. Address it to the person who hurt you. Tell them how their acts made you feel. Let it all out. Release the poison. At the end,

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explain that you now realize how holding onto all that pain was hurting you, and the only way to heal is to let it go, to forgive them.

Explain how you want to be free from your past. You plan to move forward with your life. You refuse to be weighed down by what happened. While going through this process, you'll have to decide whether you want a relationship with the person or not. When you finish the letter: mail it or flush it. The choice is yours.

If the act was especially vile, that may not be the end of it, but it's a start. You've created the right mindset and will be moving in the best possible direction. Maybe you have to go through the act of forgiving ten more, a hundred more, or a thousand more times before it becomes real in every sense. That's fine. One step at a time, in the right direction, eventually will get you where you're trying to go.

Keep moving that way. Write the letter again if you want. Write one every day until the venom fueling the words weakens. Eventually, it will, and you'll be in a much better place for it.

There's no reason to allow the people who hurt us to continue to have so much power over our lives and peace of mind. There is only one way to take it back. I've tried the revenge route, and it doesn't work. It creates even more, bad feelings without fixing any of the old ones. It forces you to justify anger and hate so you can overcome your conscience enough to hurt another person. Forgiveness is the only way to resolve these feelings permanently.

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The final element of forgiveness is smaller than the previous ones but equally important. It refers to the forgiveness required on a daily basis. You use it to overcome the irritations caused by interactions with loved ones, friends, random acquaintances, and even rude strangers.



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It may be more correct to call this form of forgiveness: *acceptance*. Acceptance means we recognize that, just like ourselves, no one else is perfect. It demands we accept the fact that others will disappoint us at times, and it creates tolerance towards these inevitable irritations.

This mindset makes prison more bearable in a number of ways. Without it, sharing an 8' by 12' cell with another human being becomes torture. Without it, all the daily, indirect instances of disrespect in a cellblock will mount until you're ready to choke the next guy who screams in your ear, bumps into you without apologizing, or blocks a doorway when you're in a hurry.

Without this attitude, relationships fail. An acceptance of each other's imperfections has to exist between two lovers who live together. Without this type of tolerance, a long distance, prison relationship won't make it a year. Every phone call, you'll be more likely to wound her with your words and vent frustration instead of sharing love.

One way to make acceptance work is by focusing on the good. When I was locked up, whenever I felt irritation towards my cellie, I would stop as soon as I noticed myself harboring resentment. Then, I would shift my focus away from whatever he did to piss me off.

I would remind myself that he was in prison too. He was as frustrated about being there as I was. This understanding helped me to generate compassionate feelings towards him.

After that, I would focus on his good qualities. Everyone has them and usually, others are better at areas that we lack. You can find them with a sincere look. I would remind myself he was more friendly than me, or less grumpy in the mornings or whatever. By this point, my original judgement towards him would shift to the good examples he set for me in other ways. After that, not only

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would I no longer be irritated towards him, but I would be fully aware of the good things he could teach me through his example. From that enlightened mindset, I could talk to him calmly and work through issues without unleashing anger that would increase the chances of a fight.

These same mental techniques can be applied to relationships. When your wife pisses you off, pause. Think about her good qualities. What do you love? What does she do better than you? When your irritations make a shift to more warm feelings, then talk to her. Even if all the anger doesn't disappear, you'll be less likely to intentionally hurt her with insults or verbal attacks. Try to resolve your problems with each other from a state of acceptance. Keep your heart open even when she frustrates you.

Couples often play unproductive and unnecessary games. You can't score points in a relationship and keep it happy at the same time. Winning an argument makes the victor feel superior and makes the loser want to retaliate.

Forgiving our partners releases all that bitterness. Accepting them allows closeness and greater intimacy to develop. All it costs is a little pride, but if you make an effort with it, so will your significant other.

The cellie dynamic has some similarities to keeping peace in a relationship. Pride can screw up both types of social interactions, but *acceptance* helps. *Acceptance* prevents wounded pride from taking offense. In either scenario, people who have the wrong attitude, perceive slights. Sometimes these wrongs were unintentional. Sometimes, they're imagined altogether.

Accepting your cellie's, or your woman's, imperfections create the right mind frame before they even make mistakes. You'll be less likely to jump to incorrect conclusions or be suspicious when they've done nothing wrong. You'll also be more tolerant when

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they do screw up. It frees energy otherwise wasted with fretting and worrying. It saves you from burning precious time with paranoia regarding imagined intentions, ulterior motives, or nefarious actions.

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The Serenity Prayer provides a great mantra for convicts:

**Accept what you can't change. Fix what you can.**

Return to this idea every time you feel helpless in there. Most weeks, it will be a daily occurrence.

Staff will do their best to keep you stressed in that place. When they change the rules arbitrarily, accept it. Put your energy into something else. Learn how to work around shifting procedures and asshole guards. Keep a fluid mind state about the constant change in there, or you'll go nuts.

You will establish a routine, and as soon as it gets comfortable, something will happen to screw it up. The yard will close early every day. A Covid quarantine will come. A new warden will transfer in and disrupt things throughout the facility, even pissing off the guards with all the altered procedures.

Greater than 90% of the changes in prison don't favor the inmate. That's just the way it is. Accept it and move your mind towards more productive endeavors.

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Accept the truth about these things. They will happen frequently. Don't get pissed off about the inevitable. Combat them with fluid, backup plans.

Keep your cell stocked with books, magazines, crosswords, Sudoku, and hobby craft supplies. Always be ready for the next lockdown. Create an alternative cell workout routine for unexpected rec yard closures. You never know when they'll decide to cut the grass or the guard on duty will bang in sick.

With every inconvenience, tell yourself to remember this in the future, make a mental note and store it for after your release into the free world. Hold it for some day in the far distance when you feel tempted to cut corners, take the easy path, or break the law. Store them in the moment to use for something positive in the future. These frustrations are the best incentives to never come back to prison.

As far as disrespectful inmates go, try to see them differently too. Incarceration causes them the same pain it does for you, but they probably don't have the same coping mechanisms you do, especially if you incorporate the ones in this book into your life. They may have faced more suffering in their pasts than you too. They might not have known as much love.

Due to their shitty upbringing, they might not even realize they're being disrespectful. With this understanding, generating tolerance towards them becomes a little easier. It won't make them more likeable, but it can make it easier for you to share space with them.

Don't worry about trying to fix them. Just focus on not polluting yourself with negative feelings towards them. Also, remember where you are. Distance yourself from the violent ones. Stand up for yourself when the situation calls for it.

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Forgiveness doesn't require anyone to be a pussy. It doesn't demand you allow anyone to hurt you.

Forgiveness will help us open our hearts. When they're filled with bitterness, we can't be truly happy. With it shut, we can't make a real connection to others. We're too scared to take risks, too worried we might be hurt or taken advantage of. It creates a wall that isolates us. It guarantees we won't be happy. Forgiveness provides the best tool to counteract all that resistance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RIGHT THINKING

*Forgiveness* cleans up the crap an inmate carries into prison. It releases pent up resentment, hostility, anger, and hate from a convict's past. It washes the heart. *Right Thinking* keeps the space clean. See it as daily housekeeping for the soul and closely linked to the subconscious. The heart has a mind too, but thinks with feelings. On the other hand, the brain is logical, thinking, and conscious. Right Thinking cleanses the brain, which in turn, keeps the heart sparkling fresh.

Our minds rarely stop working. Even at night, we spend a good portion dreaming. Our brains conjure thought after thought, thousands per day, even while unconscious, and much of it leans to the negative.

Half the time, it beats you up with regrets. The other half, it makes you worry about all the terrible things life has waiting for you. Prisoners know this better than most. Few feel proud of their pasts or optimistic about their futures. When a con spends a sleepless night, tossing and turning on a steel bunk, his mind rarely fills with warm and fuzzy thoughts.

Our minds have other tendencies too. Our egos create pain through wishy-washy judgments. Part of the time, it shows us reasons to feel superior to others. Old-Head convicts feel superior to rats, chomos, and soft inmates without any buck in them. Soft inmates think they're better than uneducated cons, who came from nothing, and have few prospects upon release. Guys who try to make the best of their sentences look down on those who waste it watching TV or playing cards.

After those superior-feeling judgments, the ego will switch directions. It points out all the reasons everyone else is better

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than a convicted felon. It reminds you of every mistake, every failure, every weakness, or every fear. Some days, it makes giving up feel like the only sane option.

Though prisoners may feel an especially heavy influence from these judgements, this isn't just a condition of incarceration. This is a condition of being *human*. Negative thinking creates negative feelings in all of us. The only difference between people in this regard is that some have honed better skills at coping with the condition.

Ultimately, meditation provides the best tool to deal with negative thinking. Meditation will be covered in detail in Chapter Four. It doesn't belong in this section, because most meditation practices don't create right thinking by themselves. Instead, they decrease the quantity of thoughts rattling around the brain.

The problem many meditators have, especially in the beginning, is that they get great results from their practice, but don't carry the benefits outside their daily, contemplation sessions. Most don't know how. Right thinking provides a great way to do that.

It also works immediately. You can start using it right now before learning how to meditate. It will also provide a benefit even if you have no desire to ever practice meditation.

Thoughts create feelings. Negative thoughts conjure uncomfortable emotions. Anger starts like this. Maybe you're watching the news and thinking about how bad things seem. Maybe you remember the guard yelling at you earlier in the day and think about what you would have liked to say back but didn't. Maybe someone bumps you without saying excuse me, and you think: *Asshole!* Then, the frustration bubbles up behind it.

The anger might even be a conditioned response from a lifetime of negative thoughts. Maybe the *Asshole!* Doesn't pop

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into your head, but after spending years getting bumped by inconsiderate people, you get irritated whenever it happens. Maybe the first hundred times it occurred, there were accompanying thoughts regarding disrespect, maybe even fantasies about slugging the offender. Now, the act alone cues all the negativity from those previous thoughts so fast they may not register in the conscious mind at all.

Other times, it does get played out in your head first. Anxiety works like this for me: *Why are you writing this book? You shouldn't waste your time. You're not doing it right. You don't know how to get published anyway. You should be doing something more productive with your time. Nobody wants to hear what you have to say.*

Everybody has an enemy in their heads at times. Sometimes, it says you aren't good enough. Other times, it tells you all the reasons you should be worried. You can argue with it. You can list all the reasons why things will work out, but it will quickly remind you of every time things didn't. It will refresh your memory about every time the worst, case scenario happened instead.

Arguing with our subconscious minds are smarter than our conscious ones. They have unlimited access to our memories. Don't argue with it when it's in the middle of a mood, having a tantrum, or throwing a pity party. You'll never win one of those discussions.

Self-doubts can plague a mind too. When you get caught on this tangent, the subconscious supplies negative thoughts to the conscious mind reinforcing feelings about not being good enough. Any idle moment in prison can turn into one of these self-torture sessions.

The good news is that the mind can only think one thing at a time. If you schedule regular periods of positive thinking



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throughout your day, there will be fewer opportunities for negative thoughts to take root. Also, it creates a positive tendency to think good thoughts instead of bad ones.

All habits, positive or negative, get rooted through repetition. People with anger issues have created the habit to view most occurrences in their life with frustration. Something occurs, the negative thought arises, and anger follows.

## Gratitude Practice

One great way to reverse course with any chronic negative emotion is daily gratitude practice. I mentioned this in *Volume I: Making Mental Health a Priority While Doing Time*, but I believe it's important enough to bring up again. I credit this practice with helping me get through some tough times through the years.

Each morning before I got out of bed, as soon as I heard the hack popping the locks, I would spend five minutes thinking about the blessings in my life, and even in prison, I had plenty of reasons to feel gratitude. I was healthy. I had loving parents. I had a good night's sleep. I was a day closer to release. I had the inspiration to write books. I loved playing guitar, and had a chance to do it every day. I also got to exercise and practice yoga whenever I wanted. After recognizing these gifts in my life, I would feel excitement to face the day.

I would return to *gratitude* several times as the hours passed. If a guard talked sideways to me, instead of saying something stupid and going to the hole, I would walk away, take some deep breaths, and then practice gratitude for a few minutes. If I had an altercation with another inmate, I would think about my blessings after I made it back to my cell. Anytime I felt frustration, or sadness bubbling, I would pause and think about all the reasons I had to be grateful. I would do it again at night before sleep too.

It was a simple technique that still works for me today. I couldn't force negative thoughts out of my head. When I tried to do that with my anxiety, my mind would conjure even more worrisome images.

***What about this? Remember that? You'll fuck up like you always do.***

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You can't rationalize that stuff away. You can't argue with it. You have to take your mind in a completely new direction. In the same way, Christians say:

**“You can't force darkness from a room, but you can bring in a light.”**

Optimism isn't a trait you're either born with or not. Pessimism isn't a disease with no cure. You can train your mind to look at the world differently.

In the beginning, gratitude needs to be a scheduled part of your daily routine. Do it at least five times a day. After a while, it becomes habitual. With practice searching for the blessings in your life, you simply become aware of the fact that your life is blessed. Your perspective changes. Even in prison, it works. Gratitude stops being a task to perform and turns into the natural way your mind interprets your life.

This doesn't mean you ignore problems. It just provides a way to not get pissed by the smaller problems, and it prevents creating new problems. When you have big problems, it puts you in a better mind frame to deal with them, but I'm not advocating you become a pussy. In prison, sometimes you have to stand up for yourself. Sometimes, you have to fight.

Gratitude just helps you not be so reactive to conditioned negative emotions. Some guys see red and lash out. With gratitude, you can pause and put yourself in a better head space. With the clarity it brings, you can make better decisions. Instead of harsh words or rash actions, you can try smiling, forgiving, walking away or with a clear head, decide to two-piece an asshole on his chin when the situation demands it.

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In Chapter One, I mentioned the Buddha's First Noble Truth: "Life is Suffering." His Second Noble Truth is: "Suffering is caused by desires." Desires cause every pain in a convict's life.

Cons punish themselves with fantasies about women they can't touch, food they can't eat, places they can't go, buzzes they can't enjoy, and money they aren't making. Some torture themselves by watching cooking shows on television. Others develop dick callouses and dehydration issues from bingeing porn on contraband cellphones. Some get on dating apps and meet real women they can't touch. Mostly though, they spend every day dreaming about release and believe true happiness can't be felt this side of the razor wire.

Gratitude helps to nudge thinking patterns in a better direction. Instead of seeing all the things missing, it creates the habit of realizing the good things in one's life. It provides a good starting point.

The next concept I'll discuss permeates all the world's spiritual traditions:

**"The world *is* as you see it."**

This means our perspectives can be shaped, and with the right perspective, prison can stop being a living hell. It might not become paradise, but the experience can be improved greatly.

Optimism develops like this. Gratitude practice can create an optimistic outlook. You eventually move from looking for the good stuff, to seeing it without effort, and then, it grows into an expectation that good will keep coming.

When gratitude practice matures, it can grow into

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*Contentment.* *Contentment* provides the positive mind state to counteract the pain desires create. If you feel blessed, you will be less inclined to desire for things to change.

Developing *Contentment* guarantees incarceration won't hurt as much as it would if you spent your whole bit wishing for an early outdate, a rack of spare ribs, a cold beer, or some warm thighs wrapped around your waist.

I introduced the concept of *Contentment* in the last chapter with the Serenity Prayer. There, I talked about accepting others. When we accept others as they are, we are being content with their imperfections. By doing this, we give up any desire for them to become better or to change their ways to please us. We let go of our desires for them to act differently.

This is a good mindset to have, because most assholes in prison, meaning both guards and other convicts, aren't going to change no matter how much you desire it. Strangers rarely will cater to your wants. Even the people who love you won't always live up to the expectations you set for them. By the way, how often do you live up to the expectations you set for yourself? Did you achieve all your New Year's Resolutions this year?

Accepting others isn't about being saintly. It's about sanity. The imperfections and disappointments will be there regardless of how you view people. For your own peace of mind, try to keep a tolerant attitude toward them, or you'll go nuts from watching stupid people in prison behaving badly.

With gratitude, you're saying: *I see these things that make my life better.* With contentment you say: *I have what I need. My life is good enough right now. I can find happiness in this moment. Each breath I take is a blessing. I don't know how many more I'll get. So, I'm going to savor this moment. I'll make the most of NOW. I refuse to put off my peace of mind till some future moment where things might be better.*

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If you're reading this in a cell, I understand how skeptical you might feel. You should also know that the first time you give contentment or gratitude practice an honest try, your life won't miraculously transform, but stick with it. If you can slowly change your perspective, your world will change for the better. I used these techniques to make my prison experience bearable. So can you.

Finding contentment in there doesn't mean freedom won't bring some pleasure. It doesn't mean that finally having a beautiful woman moaning in your ear won't bring joyful tears to your eyes. When those things happen, be grateful for them and try to find contentment in those moments too. Otherwise, you'll soon be looking for a different woman, or off chasing some other fantasy you'll convince yourself you can't be happy without.

Contentment is a mind state. You can create in your head. You can make a positive decision to find happiness with what you have in front of you. A perspective like this makes incarceration bearable. It also makes life on the outside of the fence better.

Make the most of your situation. Enjoy the leisure time it provides. Learn stuff. Take classes. Pick up a new hobby or several of them. Set resolutions to become a better person. Drop some weight. Get ripped. Let everyone you love know it every time you communicate with them.

One great way to practice contentment is to be less of a burden to others. Too many cons drive their families and friends crazy with demands for money and frivolous errands. See if you can get by with less, or find a job/hustle to support yourself in there.

The main thing I've seen again and again is that when guys put all their hopes on release bringing meaning to their lives, they end up disappointed soon after they get out. Then, they're one bad day away from coming back. Think about all the miserable people outside the chain link, all the divorces, all the mass shootings, all

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the folks on anti-depressant medication, and all the people eating themselves to an early death.

Freedom doesn't guarantee that life will be filled with joy. Likewise, incarceration does not have to guarantee a painful, meaningless existence either. You have more power over your life than you realize.

I talked about Reframing in *Volume I Making Mental Health a Priority in Federal Prison*. You can use this technique to grow contentment with your life as well. It can help with gratitude and acceptance too. Anytime you feel your mind taking a dark turn or harping on negativity, reframe the scenario with the most positive perspective you can imagine. You *feel* how you *think*. Use your mind to create happiness. Here are some examples:

Wrong thinking

1. *I fucking hate that guard. He says something slick every time I walk past him. He shook down my cell twice this month already.*

Reframe:

*I feel sorry for that guard. He must have a crappy life to come in here with an attitude like that every day. There are all kinds of prisons. So what? He can shake my locker down whenever he feels like it. It's not like he's going to catch me doing anything wrong.*

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Wrong thinking:

- 2. Those lazy, rec cops didn't show up for work again. I haven't been able to run all week. What a bunch of incompetent bastards!*

Reframe:

*My legs need to rest anyway. They did me a favor. I think I'll do yoga by myself and stretch my hamstrings, quads, and glutes.*

Wrong thinking:

- 3. Why isn't she answering the phone? She's probably banging one of my friends.*

Reframe:

*She didn't pick up the phone. I know she's busy as hell between work and the kids. I'm lucky to still have her in my life. I'm going to write her a letter and tell her how much I love her and appreciate her for taking care of our children while I'm in here.*

Wrong thinking:

- 4. I'm going to be in my 40s when I get out. No one's going to hire a middle-aged ex-con. I'm fucked!*

Reframe:

*There's a shortage of truck drivers in the country. Most companies will hire felons too. I think I'll use a Pell Grant to get my CDL, and I'll never sell drugs again. After all this time behind the fence, seeing the country in a big rig sounds like Heaven!*



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The idea behind all those mind tricks shows you that while you have no power over many things that happen in your life, you always have the power to choose how you respond to circumstances. Many people, especially those weighed down by anxiety, depression, or chronic anger, feel helpless regarding out-of-control emotions. Every time something bad happens, the react with more negative feelings.

On one level, many emotions are part of the human experience. As long as we're in these bodies, we have to deal with these feelings. Sometimes heavy ones, but we aren't powerless. We aren't corks moving wherever the waves of our emotional states direct us.

If we take daily conscious action, gradually, we can take back some power over our minds. You don't have to always be pissed off, because you're locked up. Make gratitude a scheduled part of your daily activity. Set five periods throughout you're waking hours for it to be done. Start the day in bed with it. End it there with it again before sleep.

Continue with the pattern until it develops into a natural habit. Eventually, you'll do it without forethought. A grateful mind state will become a defining personality trait. Your mind will produce gratitude without conscious effort. People will assume you're just an optimistic person, but you'll know you created the state through your own actions.

For the other techniques, set goals too. With *Reframing*, whether to build *Acceptance* or *Contentment*, start by posting *Post It* notes in your cell. For *Acceptance*, remind yourself to look for the good qualities in others. Start with the people most vital to making your prison experience bearable: your cellie, your spouse, your kids, all the cons you work with or live near. Then, focus on the people you naturally dislike the most.

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For *Contentment*, your *Post It* notes should remind you to minimize desires and enjoy the moment more. Stop whenever you catch yourself in a fantasy regarding the things missing. After you pull your mind from the daydream, name ten things you feel grateful for having. Once the ache caused by a sense of lack eases, tell yourself:

***My life is full right now. I have everything I need right now. Happiness exists in this moment. All I have to do is claim it.***

**“That a man can change himself... and master his destiny is the conclusion of every mind who is wide awake to the power of right thought.” Christian Larson**

Use some *Post It* notes to remind yourself to *Reframe* the complaints in your head too. I know this seems like a lot of tasks, so start small. Try to do *Gratitude* practice five times a day and at least four *Reframes*.

You'll be able to do all the exercises in less than twenty minutes total. As you develop the habit, your mind will start reframing and thinking gratefully automatically. These reactions will get triggered by any negative occurrence you have to face. At that point, you've created a positive habit, a conditioned beneficial response to the bad stuff in your life. Other cons who observe you though will just assume you're a natural optimist.

Whenever you catch yourself complaining in your head, stop and *Reframe*. Practice looking at the situation differently. Whenever you feel like life isn't being fair or you're missing out, practice *Gratitude* for a few minutes.

Also, pay attention to the company you keep. Whenever I found myself surrounded by complainers in there, I would join

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them. Negative energy is contagious. It's more catchy than MRSA. Try to minimize your exposure to angry people, cell warriors, and guys who never see the bright side in any situation. Try to steer clear of prison gossip too. It's a way of putting people down with stories that might not even be true. Also, ignore *inmate.com*, those cons who stir the pot with their stories about changes the administration plans to make a facility. Half the time, the stories aren't true and 100% of the time they're told to stress fellow inmates out.

***We're getting transferred!... They're closing commissary for a month!... They're putting a third bunk in every cell!***

Further, avoid the news as much as possible. If you are a cable news junkie, try to minimize daily viewing to 30 minutes, but preferably much less. Don't worry. You will not miss anything important. If something big happens, everyone will be talking about it. The news sells more commercial time by airing fear, hate, anger, and worry. You already have enough negative stuff in your life. Why add to it unnecessarily?

Ultimately, the calm, meditation provides, is the best way to create and maintain contentment and all other forms of right thought. Most importantly, the techniques in this chapter compliment the gains earned in a seated, meditation practice. Right thinking gives the mind a positive task throughout the day to preserve and enhance the benefits acquired through meditating.

Meditation makes a person more aware of the quantity and quality of the thoughts rattling through the brain. Using both techniques together, helps a convict turn his mind into an ally. Otherwise, it will be an enemy making incarceration more painful than necessary.

## STEP 2: LOOK INSIDE

Every inmate comes to prison with unresolved issues. Incarceration doesn't highlight anyone's finest hour. Something bad happened to put a con there. Whatever the reason, most inmates start doing time filled with pain in various forms.

They often harbor bitterness, resentment, guilt, recriminations, low self-esteem, and many other toxic feelings. Step 1 provided a couple of tools to clean out long-standing, negative emotions using *Forgiveness*. It also showed how to do daily maintenance to keep the mind clear, resolve new irritations as they arise in a healthy way, and create a positive perspective that makes incarceration bearable.

The *Right-Thinking* exercises help a prisoner realize the power thoughts have. They also empower a person to shape thoughts in a productive way to make life better. Step 2 builds on those successes.

Step 2 takes the foundation that has been built and adds to it. First, it teaches *Meditation*, and no other practice grants a better understanding regarding thoughts, the mind's function, or how to face life's pain in the most productive way. Several *Mindfulness Techniques* will be taught here.

The second part of Step 2 will look at *Introspection* and *Contemplation*. You can use these tools to explore any existing faith you have more deeply. You can use it to sample various teachings for relevance, or if religion leaves a bad taste in your mouth, you can employ them to investigate your own mind more deeply.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP!

In the last chapter, I talked about how changing a man's perspective will change his experience. To do this, you have to train the mind to move away from negative tendencies, using good thoughts to replace bad ones. Since thoughts create feelings, this technique can make prison more bearable. It can help you see a better world than the average convict who suffers every day in there.

This chapter will teach you how to investigate the nature of thoughts more deeply. Make your first goal with meditation simple. Try to notice your thoughts. Pay attention to how many there are and what they're telling you.

We frequently run on autopilot, not even paying attention to the rambling dialogs in our heads. Barely conscious grumblings can bubble into full-fledged anger, if we don't use a little awareness to nip the mind's direction before the negativity fully manifests. Stopping this unaware tendency makes sense, because most thoughts stir discomfort.

They tell us we aren't good enough. Sometimes, they go in the opposite direction and show us why we're better than everybody we're judging. Other thoughts make us hungry for the things missing. Wasting energy while drooling over all the things we can't have is a guaranteed way to make prison suck more than it should, and all these examples could cause pain, even if we aren't giving them our full attention.

The first meditation technique I'll introduce to you is called *Mindfulness*. It is a simple process that can help you become more mindful of the thoughts flowing through your brain. It also

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can build resistance to the enticing power negative thoughts have. With mindfulness, you'll notice the thoughts more often but be distracted by them less. They will float by in the back of your mind without attaching to them.

You also can learn how to sit with the really loud thoughts. Some will be angry, sad, worried, or hate-filled. They will cause a bunch of discomfort when they arise, but *Mindfulness* builds tolerance to them. It increases the ability to resist the pain.

It's an uncomfortable learning process, but eventually, you'll come to an incredible understanding: It isn't necessary to wallow in the discomfort each negative thought attempts to create. Each distressing blip conjured by your mind is just a thought, and the pain it offers won't become a reality unless you attach yourself to it. Most importantly, mindfulness gives you a tool to remain *mindful* of your thoughts without wallowing in the pain they offer.

Just because a thought creates a feeling doesn't mean it speaks the truth. If you hold, *I'm worthless*, in your mind, it will make you feel bad, but that doesn't mean the observation is correct. Meditation teaches you how to recognize negative thoughts as the lies they are. It also takes back the power they want to steal from you.

You build tolerance by breathing through the discomfort. What you resist, persists. Mindfulness teaches you how to be present with discomfort, without fighting it, or magnifying it in any way. You sit with it until it disappears.

In the previous chapter, I said you can't force negative thoughts from your mind. You can't push the darkness out, but you can bring in a light. Since your mind can only think one thing at a time, you can use a positive thought to replace negativity. Mindfulness works off the same principle. We can't turn off that rattling narration in our skulls. It supplies commentary for everything we

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do. It voices an opinion about everything we see. Some days, it bounces around like a Jack Russell Terrier on Red Bull.

You can't make the noise go away, but you can direct your attention elsewhere. The most common focal point uses the breath. With this, thinking about respiration replaces all other thoughts. You focus your intention on each *Inhale* and *Exhale*. Feel the air come in. Feel it leave the body. Taste it. Notice how it swirls in the back of your throat. Pay attention to the natural pause at the top and bottom of each breath.

Respiration is the most basic life function. We have to breathe continuously or die. Besides sustaining life, breath also has a profound effect on the state of the mind.

Think about how your breath slows and deepens as you drift close to sleep. Now, imagine how it changes when you're scared. It comes high and fast in the chest. Fear can make a person hyperventilate.

What about when you feel grief? Long sighs are exhalations that vent sadness. Think about how crying screws up breathing patterns. What about sex? Pulse and respiration both speed up, and then, most people inhale and hold the breath just before orgasm.

Just slowing the breathing process during meditation causes a relaxing effect on the mind. The metabolism slows down too. This alone settles the mind into a state where fewer thoughts arise. The breath also provides a place to bring your concentration to every time a thought slips through your defenses and distracts you or causes you to daydream.

I like to think of meditation as *Concentration Practice*. Normally, we concentrate on the random thoughts scrolling through our minds and allow them to dictate how we feel. Meditation teaches us how to place our concentration elsewhere.



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Through my years teaching, I often heard inmates complain they couldn't concentrate. They acted like it was a disease they had since birth, like maybe I needed to step back to prevent myself from catching it. They all claimed it would prevent them from ever succeeding at meditation. Using this excuse, many even refused to try it.

Concentration is a skill one develops in meditation. It's the best remedy for any focus-related issue or infirmity. Just like the bench press strengthens chest muscles, practicing *Mindfulness* builds the ability to focus your mind. It doesn't come with one session, and maybe not with the first twenty, but with continuous practice, you will develop the skill.

Long-term *Mindfulness* practice makes you more intelligent, because it improves concentration greatly. You will retain the information you see and hear better. You will absorb the stuff you read faster. Mindfulness also provides other benefits.

It lowers stress. It improves sleep. It balances emotions. It boosts confidence.

The relaxing effect that *Mindfulness* creates will become addictive. At first, it feels like a chore you have to pencil into your schedule. Later, becomes a cherished part of your daily routine, as habitual as brushing your teeth.

Meditation helped me escape prison every day. I had a regular time scheduled in the afternoon, but anytime I felt stressed or angry. I would sit until my mind state improved. This, more than anything else, helped me keep my sanity during an experience many would consider hell on Earth.

I recommend starting with a daily, fifteen-minute session. Do it for three months. After ninety days, ask yourself if your life feels better than it did when you first started.

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If you follow the previous paragraph's advice, most likely, when the three months end, you will be sitting longer than fifteen-minutes per session, because you will enjoy the effect it has on your peace of mind. I recommend working up to at least sixty-minutes per day. Some people like two, thirty-minute sessions. Others prefer one for an hour.

The first problem to overcome concerns when and where you do it. Hopefully, your cellie has a job so you can practice while he's gone. Otherwise, talk to him about giving you an hour a day in the room by yourself. If you do the same for him, it shouldn't create a problem.

If you live in a dorm or fishbowl, you can pretend to be asleep and meditate while lying on your bunk. Get creative if you have to. I've meditated while standing in the shower, parked on a bleacher at rec, or even sitting in the grass on the softball field.

*TRULINCS* offers guided meditation downloads, nature sounds, and meditation music. Each can help with drowning out background noise. I like Deva Premal, Snatam Kaur, and Tibetan Buddhist throat chanting. If you have a mantra you'd like to use, type it into the title line, and I guarantee you'll find 100 song versions of it to choose from on the computer.

I would warn you not to rely on music too much, though. Don't let it become a crutch you always need to reach a meditative state. Once you develop some skill at meditation, schedule some of your sits without the music, and you should be able to block out background noise by focusing entirely on your breath.

Environmental sound is nothing more than potential thoughts waiting to entice your mind away from your practice. For example, you hear a fire alarm and drift into a fantasy about saving Sofia Vergara from a burning building. When you hear something like a door slamming, let it move through your

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awareness, and then return to the sound and feelings associated with breathing.

There are lots of ways to sit when you meditate, but if you're a beginner, I'm going to assume your hips and thighs are tight. If so, start your practice sitting in a chair. This is the position Taoists prefer anyway. They call it: *Emperor's Posture*.

To begin, place a pillow or a couple folded blankets under your chair. Make the cushions thick enough to raise your hips higher than your knees when you sit. This will reduce strain on the lower back. Keep your feet flat on the ground a hip's width apart. Scooch forward on the chair. Don't let your back touch the back rest.

Clasp your palms together in your lap. Pull your shoulders back. Straighten your spine and tuck your chin, pushing the top of your head up toward the sky. Imagine your spine looking like a string of pearls connected through your head and up into the sky. Visualize it being pulled from the top. Let it straighten, lengthen, and then, allow your weight to sink down onto the bottom of each hip bone. Rock slowly side to side and feel your butt sink into the seat.

Close your eyes, but not all the way. Let a little light in, but not enough to bring anything into focus. If you close them all the way, the backs of the eyelids tend to turn into a movie screen for your daydreams.

Keep your mouth closed throughout. Breathe through the nose. Keep the tongue pressed into the roof of the mouth to slow saliva production. Try to ignore the urge to swallow. For that matter, ignore itches as much as possible too. While we're at it, stifle farts too, and generally, don't be distracted by the body's attempts to draw your attention from the breath. Otherwise,

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your ego will make like Homer Simpson with constant urges to gulp and scratch throughout the practice.

For the first, ninety days, count each inhale and exhale. This makes concentrating on the breath a little easier for beginners. As you inhale, say: *ONEEEEEEE*. As you exhale, say: *TWOOOOOO*. Do the counting in your head, not out loud.

Keep mentally counting each breath until you reach *TEN*. Then, start over. Make it a game. See how many times you can reach *Ten* each session without a thought stealing your attention or a daydream invading your mind.

Don't get frustrated when you lose focus. Very few people on the planet could sit for fifteen minutes, counting the breath till *Ten*, over and over, without losing focus several times. Your first, twenty sessions you might not make it to *Ten* once without a thought intruding, and that's fine too.

We all have to start somewhere. Don't expect to be good at something the first time you try it. Just start over every time you get distracted.

I guarantee your first session, a couple breaths in you'll think:

*This is stupid. What a waste of time. Who does this guy think he is anyway? I'll fart if I feel like it!*

Once the thought-stream ends, start again by inhaling on *One*. By the time you get to *Four*, another distracting image will come:

*My first day, and my cellie is already calling me Yoda.... Kill him in his sleep, I will.*

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Whenever the tangent ends, come back to the breath and counting. You might make it to *Three* this time before you start thinking about dinner, calling your wife, or a thousand other things. Whenever you realize you've become distracted again, start over at *One*.

---

Keep things simple in the beginning. Do the above method for ninety days. Some people I have taught decide they liked this method enough to continue with it and not bother learning anything else. Others want to study deeper methods. Regardless, *Breath Counting* will establish a strong foundation. Even after many years doing Taoist *Internal Alchemy Meditations*, I still return to *Mindfulness* on a regular basis. I seldom go more than a week without revisiting it.

In the next chapter, I'll provide some sources for deeper instruction. Some are available to inmates free of charge. Use them, or explore a different path of interest to you, but success depends on you taking responsibility for your search.

When I first got into meditation, I explored hundreds of techniques. I tried various methods from several schools of Buddhism and even more with a Hindu flavor. I sampled Eastern teachings, Western ones, and recent fusions conjured by modern instructors. After wasting years, I found the path that worked best for me, Taoist Qigong.

It spoke to my interest in martial arts and also to a desire to learn Tantric practices. The Chinese actually were the first to practice sexual yoga, and for that reason they seemed like a better source to use than the Indian version. After satisfying my more material desires (Not with my cellie though. Even though what happens on the cellblock stays in the block.) I discovered that this

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practice provides profound spiritual benefits too. The techniques used meditation to build energy reserves, feel chi as a tangible sensation, and learn how to use it for health, longevity, sexual, martial, and spiritual benefits. These practices changed my life.

Those teachings are too intricate to cover here. If you want to investigate them, I'll provide some sources in the next chapter. Before I end this section though, I'll offer a few alternate breathing exercises for you to explore. Again, it would be best to focus on the *Counting Method* for ninety days before trying these new ones.

## PURE MINDFULNESS

True *Mindfulness Practice* doesn't use counting. You sit and follow the breath naturally. Just watch the breathing process. Keep the mouth closed. Inhale through the nose. Taste the air as it swirls in the back of your throat. Exhale nasally too. Feel your belly expand as the diaphragm lowers. Stay present in the moment, and mindful of your surroundings.

Let sounds and smells wash over you without allowing them to pull you into a daydream. If you want to experiment here with open eyes, just look forward without focusing on anything in particular. Allow sights or movement to pass without reaction.

With *True Mindfulness*, you let go of a focal point like counting and trying to simply stay present. Since the breath will be flowing throughout, let it come. Notice it, but you don't need the laser focus counting demands. Mindfulness asks you to live in the *Now*. Don't think about the past. Stay in the moment. Don't worry about the future. Just sit, breathe, and pay attention.

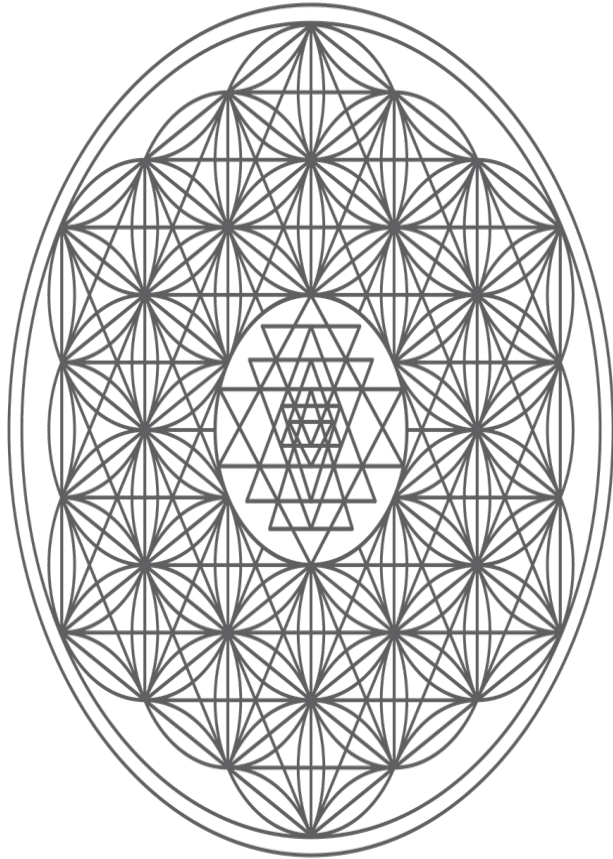
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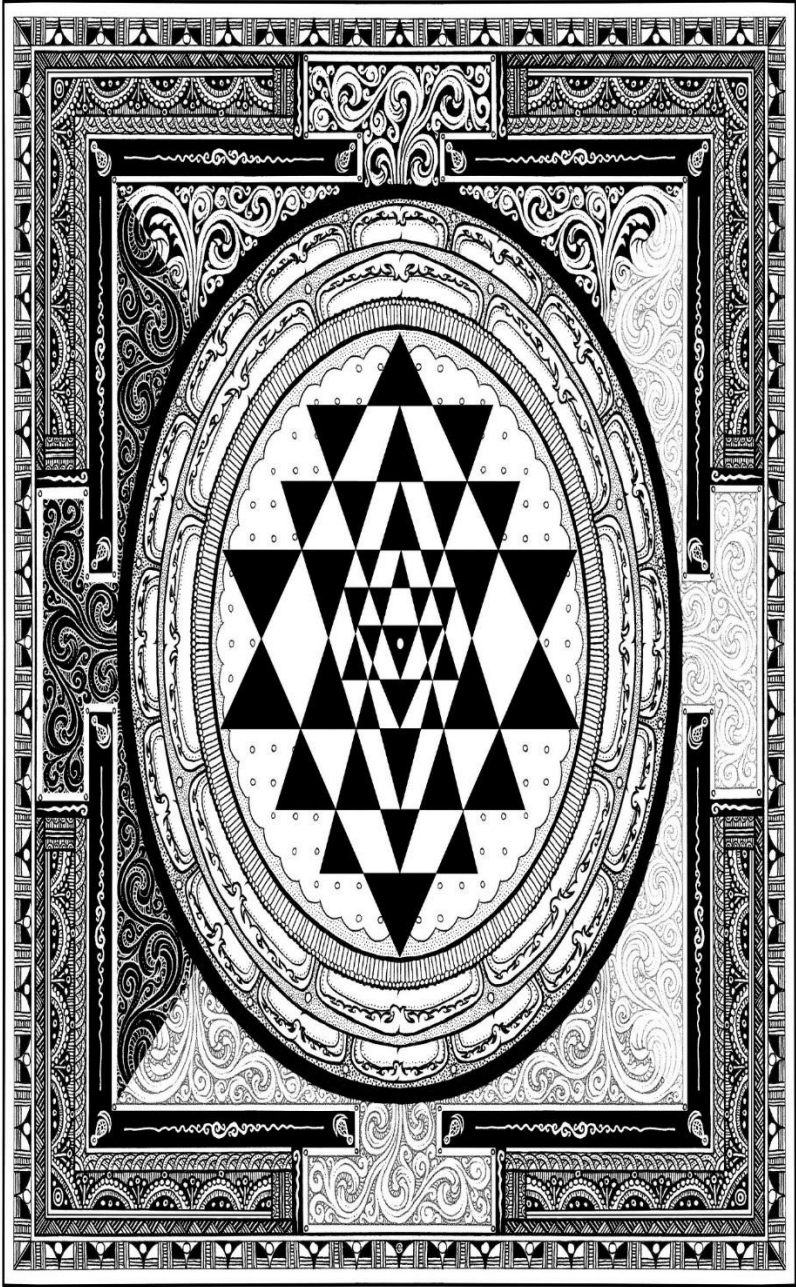
## YANTRA

Yantras are focal points. Just stare at the picture and breathe.  
Stay present.



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Allow your eyes to stay relaxed while you gaze at these. Dive into the designs but remain present while you do it. These provide a cool focal point for creating a meditative state, and they do it quickly.

## KEN WALKING MEDITATION

Take your practice to the track on the regular. While walking, look to the horizon. Try to take in the entire expanse of the sky. Take it all in without focusing on one point. Time your breath with your steps. Feel your feet hit the ground, heel to toe, heel to toe. If you're walking at a normal pace, inhale through two steps. And, exhale through two steps. Wear earbuds and avoid eye contact with other cons. That way, they will leave you alone.

My homies used to watch me doing *Ken Hen* and say: "Scott's out there meditating again. He's getting ready to start his cult."

It was worth a little verbal abuse to know they wouldn't bother me when I was practicing.

## CANDLE GAZING

People have been enthralled with fire ever since they learned to control it. Get a candle from the chaplain, or make one with the bottom halves of two soda cans squished together. Fill the bottom one with baby oil. Drill a hole in the middle of the top one. Shove a shoestring wick through the hole. Light it with two batteries connected with steel wool. If you don't know how to make one, find a tattoo artist in your block. He will have a candle like this he uses to burn soot for ink.

You can use the breath or let it go and just watch the candle flicker. *Candle Gazing* has many similarities to *Yantra Meditation*. Both use vision to create a meditative state.

## VIRTUE BUILDING

Focus on a quality you would like to grow:

***Calm Acceptance:*** This helps with anxiety. Instead of counting the breath, sit and think about accepting the problems, worries, hang ups, and anything else your mind throws at you. Whatever pops into your head, imagine yourself smiling at it, giving it a mental hug, and saying: *I accept this*. When the next one manifests, *I accept this too*. No problem is too big. No worry is too scary. Just keep expanding and making your acceptance bigger and bigger.

***Kindness:*** Imagine feeling kindness towards others. Every time a judgement arises, stop and try to look kindly on the person. If it is a self judgement, try to think kindly towards yourself.

***Empathy:*** Sit and think about how connected we all are, how we all want to be loved and treated with respect. Try to see your fellow man as family and not enemies.

***Inner peace:*** Think about the most relaxing images you can muster ... standing under a waterfall, sitting in a hot tub, the first moments after fantastic sex. Also, envision people who have inner peace. See an image of a fat, smiling buddha and smile at him.

***Joy***

***Happiness***

***Trust***

All these work in similar ways

## OPENING THE HEART CHAKRA

Inhale and visualize yourself pulling hate from the environment into the heart chakra (center of your chest). Exhale and see it shooting out the top of your head into the universe. Inhale and pull love into your crown from above. Exhale and send love out your chest into the world. That's one cycle. Keep repeating it.

This can be used for several different purposes. First, it will open your heart and make you more in touch with the emotional energy there. Although the first goal is to clean yourself with this process, it can also be used to clean your environment.

This technique will filter and refresh the energy in your cell. You can use it for relationships too. Picture your lover's face as you do the practice. It can help minimize friction between you and a cellmate too.

You can use it on a much larger scale as well. Direct it at family and friends. Use the technique as a way to pray for someone you know that is sick or going through a tough time. Bring positive energy to your cellblock, the compound, or go as big as you want, even sharing it with the entire planet. Keep at it until you feel your X-Men superpowers develop, but don't blame me if you develop crusty Deadpool skin.



## PRANAYAMA

This provides a fast method to connect to your energy body, while returning it to balance. It uses alternate nostril breathing. There are complicated ways to do this involving muscle contractions (bandhas), visualizations, and body postures, but I want to introduce it in a simplified way. For our purposes here, use it to center yourself. You can do it when you feel tired and need a boost. You can do it for thirty minutes to reach a deeply balanced state, or you can practice pranayama for five-ten minutes and then shift to your normal mindfulness method.

Hold your right hand in front of your face. Close your right nostril with your thumb. Inhale through the left nostril, and very slowly, in your head, count: *ONE MISSISSIPPI*. Pinch your nose closed, with the pinky and ring finger on the left side, and thumb on the right. Hold your breath, while counting to: *FOUR MISSISSIPPI*.

Open the right nostril with the thumb. Exhale while counting to: *TWO MISSISSIPPI*. Pinch your nose closed for a four count. Inhale through the right side for a one count. Hold the breath for a four count. Exhale through the left side for a two count. Hold the breath for a four count.

That is one cycle. Repeat for five-ten minutes. Then, move into your normal seated *Mindfulness* practice, or just do pranayama for thirty minutes by itself.

### **1:4:2 Cycle**

Inhale on the left side for a one count.

Hold the breath for a four count.

Exhale on the right side for a two count.

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Hold for a four count.

Inhale on the right side for a one count.

Hold the breath for a four count

Exhale on the left for a two count

Hold for a four count

This sequence works off a 1:4:2 ratio. As you get more comfortable with it, you can increase the time, but keep the ratio the same. For example, try inhaling for two, holding for eight, and exhaling for four. Your goal should be to move through: 4:16:8, 8:32:16, until you reach 16:64:32.

Even when you become advanced, start with an easier sequence for a few rounds. Move up to a higher ratio for a few rounds, and then try 16:64:32. Each cycle slows the metabolism a little more.

Don't try to hold your breath for a full minute as soon as you sit down. Gradually, work up to it. Work up to it each session no matter how many sessions you have. Do the counts in your head to stay present. Do a few rounds of each of the lower cycles (like, 1:4:2, 4:16:8) before attempting the higher ones.

## CONCENTRATION EXERCISE

If you want to build your ability to concentrate, grab a stopwatch or a clock with a second hand. Start the timer, or stare at the clock as the second-hand hits 12. Time yourself to see how long you can go without getting distracted.

Stay relaxed. Keep the muscles in the neck, jaw, shoulders, eyes, and back loose. Don't worry about the breath. Let it come naturally.

Start over whenever a thought steals your attention. A thought arising isn't robbing your focus, unless you forget about the clock. Keep it fun. Don't get mad at yourself for losing focus, but this does provide a great way to track your improvement.

If you get distracted easily while reading. If you have to read the same sentence three times before it registers, if you read an entire page and don't remember anything because of a daydream, the concentration exercise will help improve your focus.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SEARCH

Meditation provides a great way to look inside. It teaches us about ourselves. With enough practice, you turn into your own therapist. It can help heal past trauma, resolve issues from childhood, and show you the source of any emotional imbalance, while also giving you the tool to fix the pain.

Those benefits will change your life. They can help you wake up in a cell feeling gratitude. Once you experience results like that, meditation will become a natural part of your life, but these results are beside the point. They aren't the main goal, just fringe benefits that accompany daily practice.

If meditation becomes as much a part of your routine as brushing your teeth, eventually you will get deep enough to glimpse your *Spiritual Self*. Earlier, I promised not to push God or religion on you, but long-term practice will stir an interest in you, even if it doesn't exist now. Some of the insights from meditation naturally stir a practitioner's curiosity to go deeper.

**“If a man followed a sunbeam to its source, he would find the sun, and likewise if he followed his mind, he would find the Divine Source from whence it came.” Book of the Britain 6:9**

**“When your mind, so long whirled in conflicting thoughts, achieves poise, and steadies itself in itself, you will have realized yoga.” Bhagavad Gita**

A few years into my practice with Taoist Internal Alchemy, I had a life changing experience while meditating. I don't want to get into the details here, because I don't feel that I could explain it to you well enough with words on a page. I will say it convinced me, gave me tangible proof, that we are spiritual beings. There is purpose to our lives. Existence continues after death, and joy can be found even in the worst circumstances.

Many people waste their lives chasing pleasure. They suffer through empty existences without ever realizing there might be a solution to the pain. Some prisoners, get so low suicide starts to seem like the only escape available.

I had moments like that before meditation saved me. The discoveries it provided gave my life direction while I continued to serve time. Not only did I find meaning, I stopped feeling like my life was wasting away in there.

Does this sound like a bunch of bullshit?

Keep meditating. Eventually, you'll make your own discoveries. They may be different from mine, but I guarantee they'll change your life in many fantastic ways. That's the great thing about spiritual practice. Unlike religion, which demands faith, spiritual practice only demands sustained effort. Do it long enough, and the results will come. Faith becomes moot with experience.

For the best chance at success, you also need to cultivate an open mind. None of us know everything. Even the smartest

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people on the planet are relatively stupid compared to all the things humanity has yet to discover.

Some things people believed a hundred years ago, a child would laugh at today. In the late 1800s, *Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup* was sold to mothers for their teething babies. It contained alcohol and *morphine*. A hundred years from now, school children will giggle over many of our "advanced" culture's current beliefs too.

Open-mindedness does not equal gullibility. It just means you're holding off on forming an opinion until you gather more info. You're recognizing the fact you don't know everything, could be wrong about stuff, and quite possibly might learn something new.

Just a few years ago, saying you had seen a UFO would have made people think you were nuts. Now the federal government admits they exist. Before this revelation from Uncle Sam, many openminded people recognized the enormous size of the universe and made room in their heads for the fact that life could exist elsewhere just like it does here.

If you approach your meditation practice with fixed ideas, you may block yourself from receiving insights. If you discount the possibility that spiritual practice might be able to provide some answers, you guarantee your questions will remain unanswered.

Every time you sit, just open yourself to the possibility of learning something new. Don't expect results. Don't doubt them. Just sit and investigate. Search with an empty mind, and see what you learn.

You can gain insights like this without ever exploring religion. Each individual has a spark of divinity inside. With enough practice, it can be glimpsed. If religion turns you off, you can still access *Truth* without exploring an organized faith.

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But, if you don't have an aversion towards religion, it can provide a fast way to tap into knowledge accumulated over thousands of years, from masters who already did the spiritual investigation for you. To gain insights, we need to go internal with an introspective practice like meditation, but many faiths have accumulated the knowledge acquired by millions of meditators over thousands of years. With that in mind, wisdom can be found if you can cultivate open-mindedness towards religion.

Honestly, I'm not very religious. Taoism is more life philosophy than faith anyway, but it has various spiritual practices associated with it. In fact, the Chinese call Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, the *Three Teachings*. They don't consider any of them to be religions.

I chose Internal Alchemy as my formal spiritual practice. It is a Taoist inspired meditation practice that conserves, accumulates, and then, cultivates sexual energy to fuel spiritual progress. Aside from teaching men how to orgasm without ejaculation, and guaranteeing the best intercourse I have ever experienced, it has provided the deepest meditative states of my life. This system is only taught by a few schools of Taoism.

Many Taoist sects exist, many systems too. In fact, the Complete Reality School of Taoism has more in common with Zen/Chan Buddhism than other Taoist Paths. The Celestial Masters resemble an organized religion like Catholicism more than a spiritual practice.

If you look hard enough at the world's religions, you can usually find a spiritual practice embedded inside it. Often the religion was for the less devout, those Easter and Christmas service only, Christians. The spiritual practice was for the holy men. The monks meditated and the peasants burned an incense stick on holy days. Sometimes the spiritual practice leaned to the occult (or secret/hidden), because the practitioners needed to hide for

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safety. This happened a lot in Europe during the Spanish Inquisition and during the witch trials. My first book, *A Soul Call from Prison: How Yoga and Taoism Cured my Crises with Cocaine and Christianity*, covers this subject deeply, but for now, we'll take a quick look at the differences between some religions and their spiritual counterpart.

## A COMPARISON BETWEEN RELIGION AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

### RELIGION PRACTICE

### SPIRITUAL

Christianity  
Gnosticism/Mysticism/Rosicrucianism

Judaism

Kabbalah

Islam

Sufism

Taoism  
Alchemy

Qigong/Inner

Hinduism

Yoga/Tantra

Buddhism  
Zen/Bon/Nyingma

If you have the desire to explore these ideas further, here are some sources available to inmates for free:



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### JEWISH FAITH

The Aleph Institute

9540 Collins Ave.

Surfside, FL 33154

Ask for an application with a SASE

Kabbalah Research Institute

2009 85<sup>th</sup> St. Ste. 51

Brooklyn, NY 11214

Free Course

### CHRISTIAN

(These are all Protestant groups, not spiritual Christianity)

American Bible Academy

PO Box 1627

Joplin, MZ 64802-1627

## A Meaningful Life Requires Meaningful Effort

Free Bible and Course

International Christian College

PO BOX 530212

Debary, FL 32753-0212

Not free (Use a Pell  
Grant)

Bible Truth Publishers

59 industrial Rd

Addison, IL 60101

Spanish or English Bibles

### **CATHOLIC**

Paulist Evangelization Ministries

PO Box 29121

Washington, DC 20017

Free books, pamphlets, and other materials

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### **BUDDHIST**

Asian Classics Institute  
7055 Juniper Dr.  
C/O Rev. Phap Lan Nyguen  
Colorado Springs, CO 80908  
Free Buddhist Course w/SASE

Buddhist Association of the United States

ATTN: Rev. Richard Baksa

Prison Program  
Route 301

2020

Carmel, NY 10512

Free books to inmates and cartons of books  
to chaplains

Inside Dharma

PO Box 220721

Kirkwood MO 63122

Inside Dharma newsletter; pen pal program

## A Meaningful Life Requires Meaningful Effort

Snow Lion Publications

PO Box 6483,

Ithaca, NY 14851

Free one-year subscription to Snow Lion: The  
Buddhist Magazine and Catalog

The Insight Prison Project

PO Box 169

Woodacre, CA 94973

Correspondence

### **YOGA**

SYDA Foundation

PO Box 99140

Emeryville, CA 94662

Free “In Search of the Self” Course            This  
is fantastic! It’s a seventeen-year-long course I  
completed while incarcerated.

Rev. Lakshmi Barsel

Satchidananda Ashram-Yogaville

108 Yogaville Way

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Buckingham, VA 23921

Free malas, books, and correspondence

Prison Yoga Project

PO Box 415

Bolinas, CA 94924-0415

Free book on Hatha Yoga

Human Kindness Foundation

PO Box 61619

Durham, NC 27715

Ask for: *Deep and Simple* and

*We're All Doing Time*

### **PAGAN**

Cherry Hill Seminary

PO Box 212804

Columbia, SC 29221

Courses on Pagan and nature based spiritualities

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Mother Earth Ministries

The Resource Center

PO Box 35906

Tucson, AZ 85740-5906

\*Not free\* May be able to use a Pell Grant though **TAOISM**

If you have interest in learning about the Taoist system I practice, start with these books:

*Awaken the Healing Energy of the Tao* by Mantak Chia (Arizona Press)

*The Multi-Orgasmic Man* by Mantak Chia (for Men)

*Healing Love of the Tao* by Mantak Chia (for Women)

*Secrets of the Tao Te Ching* by Mantak Chia

*Iron Shirt Chi Kung* by Mantak Chia

If after reading those, you decide you like the practice, you can get a time slot for worship at your chapel. I already filed all the necessary paperwork for fellow Taoists. Tell your chaplain Taoism was approved by the Religious Issues Commission in 2008, at FCI Beckley. They have to provide you a place to worship and give you funds for materials.

Ask the chaplain to order Michael Winn's *Fusion of the Five Elements* seminar from [healingtaousa.com](http://healingtaousa.com). Explain that, by tradition, Taoists always receive oral instruction from their teachers. Since that will be impossible for you as an inmate, this

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is the best compromise you can create, and you require the instruction in order to worship correctly. If he denies you, start the administrative remedy process with an *Eight*. (I explain how to do this in Volume III of the *New Fish Companion Series: Navigating the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Rules, Regulations, and Procedures*.)

## MANTRA

If you have doubts about meditation because of your beliefs, pray for guidance before you meditate. Ask for understanding about whether you should do it or not. Read scripture after you meditate and see how it makes you feel. Does it enhance your worshipful state or not?

Mantra meditation provides a good option for those with religious beliefs. I recommend doing it before other forms of worship. It can focus concentration to improve the power of prayer. It will clear the mind to help retain and better understand any scriptural study. It also creates a worshipful state all on its own.

With Mantra, you need a verse or phrase that is short enough to be said in one breath. As you inhale, say the phrase in your head. As you exhale, repeat it. Keep the mouth closed. Breathe through the nose and say your mantra mentally, not out loud.

The practice works just like the *Mindfulness* exercise in the previous chapter. Focus on each breath, but use the mantra instead of counting to *Ten*. Below are some sample mantras from different faiths. If you don't like any of those, come up with your own, use one of the thousands of old ones I didn't list, or find a short piece of scripture you like, with a message you want to apply to your life.

### SAMPLE MANTRAS

**CHRISTIANITY:** LORD JESUS, SON OF GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME  
A SINNER



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**ISLAM:** I TESTIFY THERE IS NO GOD BUT ALLAH

**JUDAISM:** YOD-HEH, VAV-HEH (A designation for God)

**HINDUISM/YOGA:** OM NAMAH SHIVAYAH (OMMM NAH-muh SHHEEE-vuh-yuh). I bow to Shiva. (I honor my inner-power, my Higher Self.)

**BUDDHISM:** OM MANI PADME HUM (OMM MAH-nee PAH-may HOOM). I honor the jewel in the heart of the lotus. (I honor my enlightened self.)

## TAOIST SIX HEALING SOUNDS

These are used to vent negative emotions and grow positive ones. You can do them silently or out loud with a lot of noise. Throughout the practice, keep a smile on your face.

1. **Heart Sound:** HAAAAAAAAA. Red. Hate. Love.

Breathe normally and imagine that you are pulling love in on a red cloud to your heart with every inhale. After a few breaths like this, take a big inhale and hold it for a second. As you exhale, pretend a dirty cloud of hate leaves your heart with the *HAW* sound. That whole cycle is considered one *Heart Breath*. Do six cycles. (Only make the sound on the final exhale of each cycle!)

2. **Kidney Sound:** CHOOOOOOO. Blue. Fear. Calmness/Peace.

Breathe normally for several breaths. Every time you inhale, imagine peace filling your kidneys on two, blue clouds. Hold the last inhale for a second or two. Then, exhale fear like cloudy smoke from each kidney with a CHOOOOOO sound. Repeat that whole cycle six times.

3. **Liver Sound.** SHHHHHHHHHHH. Green. Anger. Kindness.

Breathe normally for several breaths. Every time you inhale, imagine kindness filling your liver on a green cloud. Hold the last inhale for a second or two. Then, exhale anger with a SHHHHHH sound. Repeat the whole cycle six times.

4. **Lung Sound.** SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS. White. Sadness. Courage/Strength

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Breathe normally for several breaths. Every time you inhale, imagine courage filling your lungs on two white clouds. Hold the last inhale for a couple seconds while smiling. Then, exhale sadness with a hissing sound through the teeth. Repeat the whole cycle six times.

### 5. **Spleen Sound.** WHOOOOOO. Yellow. Worry. Trust.

Breathe normally for several breaths. With each inhale, visualize yellow light filling the spleen with Trust, a feeling that everything will be okay. Hold the last inhale for a couple of seconds. Then, exhale worry on a cloud of smoke with a WHOOOOOOOO sound. Repeat the cycle six times.

### 6. **Triple Warmer Sound.** This balances “heat” in an acupuncture meridian, an energy pathway, in the chest. Keep a smile on your face. Inhale, smile and relax. Exhale and say HEEEEEE, while visualizing heat draining down to your feet. As you inhale, raise the palms up to the shoulders. As you exhale with the sound, push the palms down to your hips. Repeat that cycle six times.

If you ever feel overwhelmed by one of these emotions, you can pick the appropriate sound/color visualization and repeat for it for as long as it's necessary. Just relax into it for 30-60 minutes imagining the emotion venting from your body as you make the noise. If you need to do them during a lockdown, you can make the noise silently in your head so your cellie doesn't think you're spazzing on K-2.

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## A FEW MORE MANTRAS TO CREATE MINDSTATES

Peace: **Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti** (OMMMM SHAN-tee, SHANtee, SHAN-tee) **I Am Enough**

**I Have a Purpose**

**I Open my Heart to the Universe**

**I Change My Thoughts, I Change My World**

**Let Go**

**I Am Always Evolving**

**I Can Do This**

**I Feel, I Know, I Trust**

**May I Greet My Life with Joy**

**My Heart Fills with Gratitude**

**You Can't Plant the Seed and Eat the Fruit on the Same Day**

**Luck Is What Happens When Preparation Meets Opportunity**

Inhale: **I Trust Me**

Exhale: **It Will All Come**

## JOURNALING FIRST OPTION: A RECAPITULATION

Journaling provides three ways to connect more deeply with your spiritual self. I call the first method, a *Recapitulation*. Webster's defines *Recapitulation* as: "to tell or restate briefly." Here, the goal is to retell but deeply, with *Contemplation*. Blank paper and pen provide a great method for doing this.

Look at it as a way to clean out anything that might be holding you back. Think about it like *Spring Cleaning* for the soul. No topic is off limits, because it's for your eyes only.

Get a notebook and spend some time writing in it every day. You don't need a plan beforehand. Don't worry about any gibberish hitting the page. Don't worry about grammar. Just stay loose and relaxed. Let your hand scribble without a lot of forethought. This will allow your subconscious to vent.

One strategy involves bringing a painful event from your past to mind. Think about it for a few minutes with your eyes closed. Then, open them and start writing. Don't worry about spelling or grammar, just write. Don't worry about it being coherent, just jot down whatever pops into your head.

This process may teach you something about yourself you didn't know. Many people have used a journal to help them let go of resentment and bitterness. You can use it while trying to clean yourself through *Forgiveness*.

*Recapitulations* also can show a person why they made certain decisions in the past. It can help them understand the reasons behind the negative emotions they feel frequently. Mostly, it helps to unload.

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It doesn't just work with resolving yesterday. It can also help you look forward with the best attitude and approach. Journaling can help you define your dreams and goals. Then, once they've been brought to mind, it can help you plan how to bring them to reality.

Don't worry about coming up with anything worth publishing the first time you pick up a pen. Don't worry about writing something that others will like. Do this for yourself without any expectations to ever share any of it with other people. Just set a time each day to do it. Think about it as a cleaning process that has nothing to do with the finished product. The act of doing it is all that matters.

Tie it in with your meditation practice. Clean your head with *Emptiness*, then pick up a pen. Try it the other way too, *Journal* then *Meditate*.

Journaling provides a great way to generate ideas. All my writing started with a *Dream Journal*. That initial effort turned into a daily effort to write about anything on my mind. Eventually, I realized I had the bones for my first book: *A Soul Call from Prison*.

## DREAM JOURNALS

As a second task, write down every dream you can remember when you wake. It would be best to do it as soon as you become conscious, but if you don't want to wake your cellie in the middle of the night, wait till morning. Do this on a regular basis, and you'll receive amazing insights about yourself.

Many *Dream Dictionaries* exist on the market that claim to be able to interpret the meaning of dreams. I have a problem with this idea, because a symbol won't mean the same thing to everyone. A dream about flying might represent freedom, adventure, and fun to one person, but to a plane crash survivor, it probably means something else entirely.

*You* are the only person who can interpret your dreams correctly. *Journaling* provides the way to develop this skill. As you're taking notes on your dreams, ask yourself, "*What did this dream mean?*"

Sometimes, your subconscious will show you, or you will feel a strong emotion associated with it. This may happen, because your higher self wants to inspire you to change a behavior, outlook, belief, or habit. Of course, you won't learn something from every dream. At times, the nightmare's root cause won't be anything more significant than the honey bun and Doritos churning in your guts, because you had a fat boy, late night.

Through practice though, you'll develop intuition about your dreams. Sometimes, as soon as you wake, you'll understand that the dream was letting you know you're worried about release, holding resentment towards a family member, or still Dua Lipa's biggest fan, judging by the way you woke up humping your mat. Whatever it is, if you evaluate it while it's still fresh, the chances increase that you'll understand what, if anything, it is trying to say.

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I've had lots of people tell me they don't dream every night or at all. Don't worry. This is just another one of those imagined diseases only spiritual hypochondriacs suffer. We *all* dream every night. Because dream amnesia occurs soon after waking, you may not remember any, but with practice, you'll start recalling several every night. The best way to cultivate this skill is to grab a paper and pen as soon as you wake up.



## CONTEMPLATION PRACTICE

*Contemplation Practice* joins Meditation with Journaling. You can use an inspirational quote, a piece of poetry you love, or a verse of scripture you would like to understand better. If not that, simply jot a thought you would like to *Contemplate* down on paper. I've used this phrase from the Serenity Prayer a bunch:

### **Accept the Things I Cannot Change**

I would start by clearing my head with a few breaths and then, rewrite the phrase ten times. This would engage my mind and senses in a tactile (touch) way. Afterwards, I would stare at one of the sentences I had written for a few minutes, bringing my eyes into play. Next, I would involve my ears and tongue by reading it out loud a few times. Then, I would close my eyes and meditate on the phrase. I would try to see every word in my mind's eye, but I would repeat it a couple times per minute in my head too.

After doing that for twenty minutes or so, I would pick up my pen and start writing. I kept my mind empty and just scribbled in a free-flow manner. Sometimes, new phrases for contemplation would develop. Other times, I just began to understand the original phrase better. Of course, some efforts came to nothing more than a relaxed state of mind, and a bunch of gibberish on a page, but a peaceful noggin is something to be grateful for anytime you achieve it in prison.

Sometimes, I would repeat the cycle. After writing, I would meditate again or contemplate a new phrase related to the first. When that session ended, I would write one more time.

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This provides a powerful way to entrench a positive thought, idea, philosophy, or intention in your subconscious. It engages all the senses. It may trigger dreams related to the topic. Post the phrase to a wall in your cell to entrench it further.

I think this process works best by finding your own phrase, but here are some I like that you can use to get started:

**We Must Become Ignorant of All We've Been Taught.**

**Who Am I?**

**What Does Contentment Mean?**

**What You Resist, Persists**

**Forgive Till You Feel Free**

**I'm Lighter Than Air, I Know I Can Levitate**

**HOT DAMN! I'm Good Looking** (Kidding on the last two)

## STEP 3: LOOK OUTSIDE

### ***Physician, heal thyself.***

Steps 1 and 2 prioritized this advice. You can't look outside until you've fixed the inside. No one wants to *give* when their own lives feel lacking.

Step 1 aimed at fixing the most common ailments prisoners face, especially when starting a sentence. Many feel overwhelmed by guilt, self-hatred, anger, worry, and sadness. *Forgiveness* provides a powerful way to start the cleaning process. It helps release the resentments, bitterness, and toxic memories fueling much of that pain.

Then, *Right Thinking* helps to further the benefits *Forgiveness* provides. *Gratitude Practice* can fill the head with something more positive than chronic, negative thoughts. *Acceptance*, *Reframing*, and *Contentment* offer ways to cope with the day-today hassles in a federal prison.

Step Two takes advantage of the improved mind state the first step provides. Without the clutter from harbored grievances or too many negative thoughts, *Meditation* can get deep fast. Calming the mind further with daily *Mindfulness* will provide further gains. It decreases the quantity of thoughts and weakens the power the bad ones have over you.

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Regular meditation might even create an opportunity for something spiritual to occur. It could provide insights about why you're here and what you need to do next. *Open-mindedness* towards practice definitely improves your chances, but *Consistent Effort* will help too. Regular meditation can provide a meaningful addition to any religious worship already a part of your life. Simply following the breath with *Mindfulness* shouldn't offend any belief system.

From this improved space, it becomes possible to look outward. A truly meaningful life starts once a person shifts from being a chronic taker to a *Contributor*. This requires the development of skills that can be shared.

Once a person becomes able to help, he or she should. No one has the right to complain about the state of the world, if they do nothing to improve it. Step 3 takes a deeper look at this concept.

## CHAPTER SIX

# IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU!

This chapter serves to confront two major obstacles to living a deep and meaningful life. Honestly, I see them as human problems more than those just making prisoners hurt. Still, Americans may be suffering from these two afflictions more than the rest of the world, and inmates fall victim more than other citizens, but they can apply to anyone. These obstacles also have an important role in deciding how much worth our lives have.

The first concerns this obsession growing in our country towards *individuality*. I'm not talking about personal freedom here, because we're going in the wrong direction with it by stripping it from individuals through government action, or surrendering it ourselves through laziness and fear. *Freedom* is what spiritual growth is all about. Freedom requires one to take responsibility for life, to own his existence fully, never playing the victim. Some people treat every difficulty in their life as an insurmountable obstacle. Then, they tell everyone else how unfair the world is as an excuse for their inaction.

This obstacle I'm referring to concerns the twisted sense of identity people try to invent for themselves. They use it to describe themselves into an inescapable box. They self-apply labels that exclude them from everyone who doesn't share the same identity. They're basically saying, "I deserve special treatment, because I'm different."

Online, every new celeb wannabe draws attention by proclaiming his or her weirdness. They seem obsessed with differences, the more shocking the better. In the name of "*Living*

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*Their Truth,*” they intentionally push others away with offensive statements, claims, and/or behavior. Then, they pretend to be victimized by anyone willing to call bullshit on their antics.

This mentality has infiltrated pop culture. Every other commercial on MTV demands we celebrate something new and tries to shame us if we even consider saying: “Hey, the emperor looks bare-assed to me.” No one can just be anything simple anymore. They need six labels and ten pronouns to fully categorize themselves into self-imposed loneliness.

By the way, I’m thinking about getting into transgender boxing, I’m pretty sure I can knock some chicks out. Hey, I’m just trying to live my best life, people. Don’t judge me. I should be able to punch who I want to punch, right?

Before you take me seriously, let me apologize for being rude. I was only trying to emphasize how crazy things have become. I truly believe we need to accept other people. No life can feel *deep* or *meaningful* without tolerance, compassion, and love. Spiritual people don’t form opinions based on skin color, sexual orientation, handicaps, or other people’s eccentricities, and we all have quirks. The only thing *normal* about humans is how fucking weird we all are. That’s why *Seinfeld* was such a hit. Having said that, spiritual people look for the similarities between ourselves and others, not the differences.

Look at this again:

### **The World *Is* as You See It.**

When you self-isolate, it’s easy to feel different. From there, you “see” differences. By that, I mean you see more inequality, injustice, and suffering than necessary. I’m not sugarcoating

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racism, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, or any other form of hate, but if you focus on the differences between yourself and others too much, you stand a greater chance of “*seeing*” a victim in the mirror.

The *victim mentality* fills a person’s world with bullies. The victim starts by claiming unfair judgments and treatment by others, but the victim judges right back. They “*see*” hate and intolerance even where it doesn’t exist. They make false assumptions and even use social media to attack the innocent. They create an unnecessary wall between themselves and everyone they don’t judge as tolerant or accepting enough.

In the words of Dennis Miller: “You’ve got to stay away from those marches ... There are a lot of violent pacifists out there ... a lot of young people with love in their hearts, who want you dead if you’re not loving enough.”

So, what’s the solution? We can start by *Lightening-the-FuckUp!* How about we try not to take everything so personally? ... even our own lives. You read that right. People who take everything too seriously blow the joy from a room faster than a hot fart. To combat that tendency, maybe we can start to smile more and assume others might feel as vulnerable as we do. Maybe they feel as lost as we sometimes do. Maybe they hope for our kindness as much as we hope for theirs.

No matter a person’s race, heritage, nationality, culture, or native language, they want to feel safe. Straight or gay, they desire love. Regardless of dreams, goals, or aspirations, they hope for a fair shake. Everyone craves acceptance. We’re really more alike than not.

Even deeper, we all have a hole inside we’re trying to fill. The only thing that varies is the methods we use to attempt it. Some people employ poor judgment and try to fill it chasing drugs, sex,

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money, power, fame, or even victimhood. Trying to find meaning in these pursuits is how I got locked up in the first place.

The techniques in this book provide some better options. To experience a meaningful life, we have to do something *meaningful* with it. Meditation helps a person understand why they feel the way they feel. Then, once they take it deeper, they gain insights about why they are here, in this particular body, on this planet.

The subjects covered in this chapter can help take you further. It can tackle the problems caused by isolation too. Many people *isolate*, because they don't feel good enough to *participate*. Fortunately, when people try to help others, they often realize their worth pretty quickly. There's no better way to overcome the obstacles preventing someone from releasing a wounded identity. Stop feeling like a target and start viewing others with compassion instead of paranoia.

When a person engages in service to his or her fellowman, the similarities between us become more obvious. It makes you sensitive to the pain other people feel. It reveals how, deep down, we all battle doubts about not being good enough from time to time. There's no better way to develop compassion when we feel angry and jaded. There's no better way to fill the void with a meaningful pursuit. There's no better way to move from a victim mentality to that of a *survivor*.

If you're sitting in a cell, you may not have any interest in volunteering your time to help anyone else. Most likely, you feel like you could use a little friendly assistance yourself. You might not even remember the last time you received an encouraging word, pat on the back, or a hug. You probably see nothing but greed, hate, anger, and ulterior motives from the faces looking back at you on the block. Even many of the prison's staff may seem more hostile than not to you.



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You might worry that trying to help another inmate will expose you to con artists, predators, and anyone else looking for an easy mark. If you try to do some good, it probably won't fix anything anyway. Instead of receiving appreciation back, people may look at you suspiciously. They might think you have a hidden agenda. All that may be true, and all that is beside the point.

Maybe you wonder how you could even try to fix someone else's life when yours feels so screwed up. It's a well-kept secret, but the best way to quench that expectant ache inside, that desire for our own suffering to end, requires us to stop focusing on the pain we feel, and try to help others with theirs. This might make sense if we look at it from the perspective created by *Right Thinking*.

If you think about what's missing, you suffer more. If you think you don't have enough, and you believe others have it better or easier, your pain magnifies. Okay, so what if you replace that tendency with a desire to find ways to help? What if you try to discover situations where you can offer assistance, a kind word, or just an encouraging smile? If you do this, maybe it could change your perspective from a victim's, to a person who believes he or she has the power to affect the world in a positive way.

Do it even if your efforts don't amount to much. Do it even if others don't seem to notice or care. Don't worry about fixing other people or their problems. Just try to put a little good into the plot of Earth you inhabit. It's about the effort, not the results, and ultimately, you'll be the one to benefit the most anyway.

We all have consciences. We all have a voice that makes us feel guilty when we do wrong. There was a short time as a young man when I believed I had crushed mine into silence, but all I had really done was to deafen my inner "ear" with drug use and selfish living.

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All the practices in this book turn up the volume on that internal guidance. I don't write this to scare you. Dana Carvey won't show up in the church lady outfit, but your conscience will encourage you to help where you can. It will also give you the only pat on the back you need for your efforts. Through it, you will know your life is on the correct path. It will give you purpose. It will show you your worth, even in khakis, with a reg number sewn on the back pocket.

Take these suggestions seriously. Incorporate them into your daily routine, and you'll start waking on that steel bunk feeling like your life has direction and meaning. They can help you climb from your rack and face the day with a smile, and make sure you never become one of those cons who sleep seventeen hours straight due to depression or boredom.

The second obstacle can make looking outward more difficult. For that matter, it makes *life* more difficult. Strangely, the problem has been worsened by our best minds, and for that reason, has taken root throughout our society.

There are two levels to it. The upper-level affects those with higher education. People with degrees tend to see the world through a narrow lens. By design, we've become a nation filled with *specialists*, experts in a chosen field, and mostly useless concerning practical skills people need to function in the world as self-reliant adults.

Well-rounded curriculums no longer exist. Public schools cut out physical education and music programs long ago. As a result, we have an obesity and an *autotune* crisis in our country. Anyone who decides to get active needs a personal trainer to guide them, and too many kids who have undiscovered talents can't play anything more complicated than I-tunes.

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Most prisoners experienced the lower level of this obstacle. They never received that high quality narrowly focused, education that could have at least provided the opportunity to support oneself, if not much else. They had no choice but to attend overcrowded, underfunded classes where safety often was a bigger concern than learning.

Few have diplomas. Most dropped out before graduation. The brightest of the bunch earned a GED on a previous fed bit, but considering recidivism rates for probation violations, those high school equivalency diplomas ain't enough.

Few cons have any book knowledge. Many can barely read. Even less have learned enough useful skills to help them succeed in the world or cope with life's unexpected problems. Still, it's strange how this phenomenon now affects the country's best and brightest too. We have an epidemic of smart, educated people with little common sense or any practical life skills who would run an extension cord to the top of a Christmas tree before thinking to string the lights with the plug end at the bottom.

Professionals tend to specialize. With the cost of a college education these days, who can blame the graduates for going after the higher salaries these jobs provide? But this explains why the medical community lacks general practitioners with a well-rounded education. We're running out of boobs and butt cheeks to inflate with all the nip-tuckers out there, but now nurse practitioners have to treat patients that would have been seen by MDs in the years before the shortage started.

I don't have a problem with specialists directly. I can't think of a more worthy goal than to master a topic as much as humanly possible, and life forced me to become an expert in this regard concerning federal prison. Instead, my issue comes from the helplessness this educational trend has create.

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I don't claim that every specialist is useless outside of his field of expertise, but it's obvious a lot are. How many people do you know who could survive on one of those survival shows? How many of your friends do you think would starve in a week? For that matter, how many could make it a week without electricity? Even if they made it physically, would they suffer PTSD for going that long without their phones?

Today, we have to find specialists to handle tasks people used to take care of on their own. At the risk of sounding sexist, in the past, men generally learned a skill set for life completely separate from what they did for a living. They could change the oil, air filter, belts, and batteries in their cars. They knew how to plant tomatoes, tend chickens, and milk a cow. They could clean a fish, shoot a buck, and identify mushrooms that were safe to eat. More importantly, the vast majority of dads stuck around. They taught, supported, and loved their children.

Even after women entered the workforce, many could still hem a dress. They knew how to can vegetables or smoke a ham. They had skills like candle making, honey harvesting, and knew many effective home remedies.

I didn't bring this up to suggest anything about gender roles. In fact, my favorite hobby starts in the kitchen, wearing an apron, while sharpening my chef's knife. What I'm saying here is that people used to have appreciable skills outside of their professions. Male or female, they weren't helpless. More importantly, they were *useful*.

Today, we need interior decorators, private cooks, nutritionists, life coaches, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, IT guys, manicurists, hair stylists, sex therapists, dog walkers, drivers, housekeepers, caddies, yes men, motivational speakers, and even people to tell us to pedal faster on stationary bikes.

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Now, you don't even need the brain power to answer a question. Just ask Alexa.

Cons talk about their street smarts all the time. Sure, it requires intelligence to navigate any illicit business dealing safely, but we all got caught. How smart does that really make us? Let's face it. Being able to eye an 8-ball without a triple beam might impress a junkie, but it won't get you far in life, especially as an ex-con on the DEA's radar.

I spent the first part talking about how important helping others is to spiritual growth. So, you may be wondering what this rant has to do with that. I brought it up to introduce a subject, the Buddha covered in his *Loving Kindness Discourse*. In it, he lists fifteen qualities which are essential to a good life. Number one on that list is:

### *To be able*

Because it comes first, we have to assume he considered this trait to be the most important.

When I first read about this in Bo Lozoff's book, *Deep and Simple* (Free to prisoners. Find the address in the previous chapter.) it spoke to me, with the exception of the big ones, as deeply as any three words ever had. During incarceration, trying to live up to those words, gave me purpose. Even post release, they still drive me.

Those words gave me a new perspective. With my thoughts focused upon them, I stopped being the cokehead who had fucked up his life. With their challenge pushing me, I stopped judging myself a failure who had hurt people with no chance of redemption. Fixated upon them, I no longer felt bound by my past. I had a goal to reach for:

As Hemingway said: **“I don’t want to be a better than my fellow man, just my former self.”**

This inspired me to get as healthy as I could in there, through diet, exercise, and de-stressing. It drove me to explore my spiritual self through meditation and other means. It made me want to complete my degree and explore every field of learning that sparked a little interest in my noggin.

It even challenged me to make my “fun time” productive. I relaxed by learning the guitar, studying Spanish, and developing my writing skills. My chill time focused on exercising my mind too, less TV and more chess, Sudoku, or quality books.

I stopped wasting days with frivolous conversation, too. I made friends with convicts doing the same type of time as me. I avoided the gossipers, complainers, braggarts, storytellers, and haters as much as possible. I had a smile, and a “What’s up?” for them, but not much else.

Here’s some of the things I did to give you an idea of how to get started:

1. Finished my Bachelor’s degree (Pell Grants are available as of July 2023 to all inmates)
2. I learned several styles of yoga.
3. I learned dozens of meditation techniques.
4. Completed the seventeen-year long, “In Search of the Self” course (free to inmates, see previous chapter for address)
5. Published my first book
6. Wrote fourteen other books

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7. Wrote the web content for a business and a year's worth of blogs
8. Took dozens of FBOP offered classes
9. Finished the B.R.A.V.E. program
10. Learned the guitar and music theory
11. Became a certified personal trainer
12. Studied world religions for fifteen years
13. Averaged reading three books per week
14. Exercised four to six days per week
15. Learned the basics to search engine optimization

You get the idea. I stayed busy.

Here's some things my productive buddies did:

1. Sold hobby craft items online
2. Published artwork in children's books, tattoo magazines, and art contests
3. Wrote urban novels
4. Earned master's degrees and PHDs.
5. Earned paralegal certifications
6. Filed their way out of prison
7. Ran successful businesses in and out of custody
8. Published poetry
9. Developed skills as tattooists
10. Learned vocational and other job skills through Unicolor and the facilities' departments
11. Learned how to trade: stocks, crypto, bonds, options ... etc.
12. Learned German, French, and Arabic.

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Hopefully, you won't have enough time to do all the stuff my friends and I did. It would be nice if you only have to experience FBOP hospitality as a brief tourist and not waste decades in there, but make the most of whatever stay you're forced to endure. Don't be discouraged by your prospects here.

You don't need a huge skillset to affect the world with positive change. An encouraging word, a smile, a pat on the back, or a well-timed, friendly joke can lift another's spirit. Sometimes, all you need do is notice and care.

Having said that, the more *Able* you become, the more helpful you can be. With ease, you move from being a taker, to a contributor. It boosts self-reliance, confidence, and the sense of self-worth. Not only that, but you begin to inspire others without intentionally trying.

A few months after I began meditating, and making attempts at becoming *Able*, my next, door neighbor approached me.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?"

I didn't know this guy. We hadn't ever spoken for more than a few words to each other. He startled me, and it felt aggressive enough to make me stop, step back, and square my feet in case he swung on me.

"Uh? Nothing's wrong with me. Actually, I feel pretty good."

"That's what I mean. You seem way too happy to be in prison. You used to walk around here mean mugging everybody."

"Yeah, I used to be pretty angry."

"Not only that. You know our cells share that air vent? I used to hear you puking every weekend, drunk on shine."

"Really? Yeah, I don't drink that much anymore. I found a better buzz. I've been meditating and exploring some new ideas."



He became the first person I ever taught. My efforts to be *Able* influenced him without even trying to talk him into change. I convinced him unknowingly with my actions instead of my words. If you become able, you can affect greater change in the world than by shaking your fist at people who disagree with you, or by trying to develop a convincing argument.

Maybe teaching meditation ain't your calling. That's fine. Everybody does a few things well. Everybody has hidden talents waiting to be discovered. Start your search by investigating subjects that interest you.

Useful people are happier. They require less help. They rarely look at problems and feel like a victim. Instead, they create solutions, because they believe in their abilities. They also realize one important fact:

**No matter how huge an obstacle appears, it can be overcome one tiny solution at a time.**

Just look for the smallest thing about your problem you know you can fix with a little effort. When you handle that, look for the next thing that appears doable. Huge tasks get conquered like this. People become *Able* like this. They learn as they problem solve. They develop skills while conquering obstacles.

I covered being *Able* in ***Doing Time the Right Way Volume I: Making Mental Health a Priority in Federal Prison***, but it was too important not to cover again here. If you feel lost about getting started, here are some suggestions:

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1. Meditate every day. Most of my book ideas popped in my head during *Mindfulness*, or while exercising with an empty mind. It develops creativity, inner awareness, selfconfidence, and dramatically increases focus.
2. Do some of the practices in this book every day. They all will contribute to your efforts of being *Able*.
3. Make a list of doable goals. Write them down on paper. Rewrite the list at least once per day until you achieve them.
4. Take every class available at your prison.
5. Use a Pell Grant to pay for print-based courses. Talk to the education officer who acts as a proctor for inmates.
6. Pick up at least two hobbies, like ceramics, or, leathercraft, music, writing, crocheting, cooking, cross stitch, or something else.
7. Exercise in a variety of ways. Switch it up between sports, weights, calisthenics, group classes, yoga, aerobics, cardio, and anything else you enjoy. Read *Doing Time the Right Way Volume II: Making Physical Health a Priority in Federal Prison*.
8. Check out at least three different religious groups at your chapel. Even if you already have a faith, do it. It won't kill your beliefs, and it might open your mind some. Tell each group you're curious. Ask polite questions.
9. Read a couple hours every day. Expand your knowledge with stuff on history, science, politics, and religion. Load up on *Dummies* and *Complete Idiot's Guides* on any subject that interests you. Read quality fiction to unwind and edify. Find inspiration in memoirs and biographies on people you admire. Don't forget self-help, motivational, and philosophical works, even poetry and essays. Find stuff that normally wouldn't appeal to you just to expand your perspective.
10. Explore the libraries at rec, education, and the chapel. You can find great videos and books if you look. Sign up for a

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program like *Life Connections* to gain access to their books  
and audio/visual material.

11. Talk to cons doing positive time. Pick up a foreign language from a native speaker. Find a professional who can enlighten you. Assume everyone can teach you something, if you ask the right questions.

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My life began to change the most when I started teaching yoga. It didn't fix all my students' problems, or mine, and the vast majority I introduced to the practice quit shortly after the six-week beginner's class ended, but some stuck with it. A few fell in love with it like I did. I'd like to think it made prison a little more bearable for them.

Those tiny successes made my life feel like it had value, something it had missed ever since those handcuffs first clicked shut. It gave me a mission. It allowed me to get out of my head. It provided an alternative to those lonely moments lying on my bunk feeling sorry for myself.

With this discovery, I started teaching, guitar, music theory, a personal training course, meditation, qigong, Tai Chi, calisthenics, and an advanced yoga class. My days became busy then. Instead of the bored, dragging state many prisoners face, my difficulty became making time for solitary pursuits like meditation, writing, and reading. Time started moving faster then.

Don't get me wrong. I never had a day in there I didn't wish I was on the other side of the fence, but I stopped feeling like my life was being wasted. I stopped feeling nothing but regret. I saw enough results to know I helped some people, maybe not in dramatic life changing ways, but I did some good.

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You have skills too. Don't doubt yourself. Could you teach Spanish? Become a GED tutor? What about starting an A.C.E. (Adult Continuing Education) class for the prison? They'll let you teach any subject. I've seen truck drivers teach the written work. Some inmates teach creative writing, resume writing, speech writing, Every manner of history, foreign languages, and many more topics.

If you can't teach, do something else. I'm not much of a people person. I'm grouchy. It's difficult for me to smile and pat backs. It makes others think I'm angry or an asshole, when it's really just my lack of social skills.

I made this confession only to show we all have strengths and weaknesses. What are you good at? Are you fit? Encourage an unhealthy homie to workout with you. Don't make him feel bad about being heavy. Instead, explain how much exercise can improve how he feels in his head and body.

Got some extra cash? Make a meal for a buddy. Make some care packages for new fish, fresh off the bus. Try to listen more than you talk. That's why you have two ears and one mouth. There are a lot of talkers in federal prison, but few listeners. Few people give a damn about what others may be going through. Few care. Be the exception.

Write encouraging letters to family and friends. Make them sound optimistic and uplifting. Assure them that you're OK. Try not to be a financial burden. With a few minutes thought, you can come up with some ways to be helpful.

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## A FINAL WORD

No matter what you do, you're going to have some bad times in there. Even after starting a spiritual practice, your worst day in prison might not have happened yet, but after the bad ones, there will be some good ones, then some more bad. That's life, in or out of a federal facility.

Without the bad as a reference point, we wouldn't know what good is. How would we recognize ugliness without beauty for comparison? The hard times provide perspective and greater appreciation when the relief comes.

The difficult times also cause us to grow if we maintain the right attitude. The suffering we face doesn't have to be viewed as nothing but punishment. It won't define us as helpless victims, unless we let it, either. If we choose to, we can see our hardships as challenges. Use them to become a wiser, stronger, and more self-reliant version of yourself.

Treat the stuff in this book as an introduction to spiritual practice, but take responsibility for your future growth by investigating more thoroughly. Keep looking. Keep studying. Keep meditating. Keep chugging. It's about the grind, not the goal.

If I had to choose one word to define spiritual life, it would be: *Perseverance*. Merriam-Webster defines this as: "the continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition."

This is the correct attitude to face every adversity, whether conjured by incarceration or not. Just keep climbing from that rack, even on the bad days. Continue to make an effort, even when it feels like it hurts too much.

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Refuse to let the time beat you. Refuse to let the past *define* you. Refuse to let the future scare you into inaction.

Trust me when I say, I understand what you're going through. I know what it's like to miss birthdays, graduations, and even funerals. I know what it's like to be gone so long, your own family has become strangers.

I also understand that when you're hurting, it can feel like relief won't ever come. You feel powerless and alone. You may feel skeptical towards anything sounding like New Age, hipster bullshit.

Even if you have an open mind, not one thing in this book may seem powerful enough to fix your life. Transformation might not take place overnight, but it is possible. Instead of focusing on the big fix, start with small goals. Add one, tiny achievement to another. Keep doing that, and pretty soon, you'll find yourself in the middle of a life-altering experience.

Good luck.

Scott Brooks Jr.

May 1, 2023

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