

## Testimonies to Silence

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

*Carl, San Quentin, Calif.*

I decided to go ahead and try the meditation class. I sat down and looked at all the different kinds of people in the room. I realized, for some reason, that we were all the same. Just human beings hoping to find a way to be at peace with the world, and all the people in it...I started to use the tools of meditations in everyday life in here. I noticed a change in my life. I began to look at things in a different lifestyle. It's hard to believe I can sit in a prison cell, on my floor, and go to a place, in the middle of all this madness, and find freedom inside myself. I can stay calm at times when everyone around me is in constant turmoil. The most difficult part of learning to meditate, and searching within, is finding out that most of my fear comes from my own insecurities, and ignorance. So much so that when I first started to become aware of my Divine Light, I almost quit. I was given the gift of the truth about myself, and with the truth I had to take ownership for all that has gone wrong in my life. It is hard not to blame others and circumstances for my shortcomings. It would have been much easier to just quit than to forge on to uncover even more about myself. For some reason I stuck with it, and found an even deeper truth. That is God does not judge, the Spirit only loves. While I am far from enlightened, I know that if I truly want a better life, I have to take the time to meditate and listen to the words of understanding and love.

*Danny, California Men's Colony,  
San Luis Obispo, Calif.*

Hope is the anchor of my life! I have been in prison for 17 years. During this time, God has accomplished in me what I was unable to do, he restored me to life. Through prayer and meditation over the years, I formed a special relationship with God. ...Centering prayer has increased my faith in God. There is a purpose and meaning in my life. I have the strength to face all situations by the power that Christ gives me. My life today is enriched by the gifts and the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

*Robert, San Quentin, Calif.*

My way of life, Islam, teaches me to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave even if it takes me to China. Recently I was given the opportunity to participate in a 12-week workshop in "Living the Eternal Way." On the path of self-realization, I have come to accept that life on Earth comes down to the interaction between people, and we need the guidance of those of you who have matured on the path. It is your willingness to step outside societal prejudices and unite the seekers of this world—inside and out—that has allowed me to validate the humanity in myself and the men of other walks of life within prison.

*Edward, California Men's Colony,  
San Luis Obispo, Calif.*

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

*Rossie, California Men's Colony,  
San Luis Obispo*

It is early morning, following my prayers and some very quiet, still meditation. There was a time in my life when "quiet" made me feel so uncomfortable because I could not stop the craziness in my head. So I simply refused to be "still." I had to keep doing "something" because I was not at peace with me. Finally, today, this morning, I understand the passage: "Be still and know that I am God." Yes, God truly is a part of all and all is a part of God.

*Anonymous*

I grew up in violence, the cause of my fear. The Tai Chi has helped me remove the fear and replace it with strength and balance. Now what is deepest in my core is love.

*Anonymous, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

Freedom is a journey... a spiritual journey of healing the wounds of the past, removing restricted beliefs and moving forward selflessly toward God. Sometimes we need guidance of a sponsor, or a good shepherd. Recovery is possible and we can find freedom. We shall do the day's work and be mindful of who we are as imperfect humans, correcting our faults, restoring peace with others, and praying openly with gratitude to God as the sun sets.

*Anonymous*

This past week for me was a lonely, serious place to be. I had to turn my focus toward the spiritual side. I need to talk very privately with God about everything. Now, in the quietness within me, not anyone around me truly knows what or how I feel. I am seeking a balance. I wish it were possible to sit and talk with you, and then you'd understand. I'm truly in tune with all going on.

*Anonymous*

We are a group of inmates searching for the Divine presence within ourselves through centering prayer...we are ourselves, at first sight, not an inspiring conclave. We are a collection of dope dealers, bank robbers, tax evaders, murderers, and even one nefarious traitor—sinners all. Yet, we gather every Wednesday and Friday in the chapel here at Sheridan Federal Correctional Institution, to reach out to the Divine reality through interior silence.

*Centering Prayer Group, Sheridan, Ore.*

One can through meditation achieve that bond between oneself and others, necessary for seeing oneself as part of the community outside the prison walls.

*Robert, Vacaville State Prison, Calif.*

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

*Marty, Sheridan, Ore.*

I wasn't born consciously until I made the choice to find silence... In drinking silence, I discovered God's buffer zone around me, relieving the pressure of the world...

*Ron, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

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

*Greg, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

So how does one deal with such sufferings and pain? ...I discovered meditation in my eighth year. I read about Zen... The stressful life of prison is still here but I've changed. My understanding has grown, my ability to deal calmly with one and all flourished. I found that there was no end to suffering and pain unless you spot in time the refuge within yourself.

*George, Attica, N.Y.*

I am currently a member of the Contemplative Community of Folsom Prison. When I came here I found myself alone, without all the people and things that I used to define who and what I was in the world. I'm starting from scratch to rebuild who I am. I want to discover my real, eternal, and true self. I found in these groups the resources and the community to explore, test, and expand my spiritual rebuilding. Because of the work of the men here and your support, an island of peace has been created in a stressful and dehumanizing environment.

*Rick, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

I have been a very active part of the Contemplative Fellowship since we were blessed with our first sponsor and meeting. Through the good and bad times... the group here is strong and growing and I feel providing tremendous benefits in the lives of those involved. The changes that occur are remarkable and most of all I seldom see those

who were active and get out of prison return. I feel it has also helped to change the atmosphere of this prison too. I can't remember the last time we had a death due to violence in this facility and that was a common occurrence prior to all these programs... Any man regardless of his race, belief or affiliation is welcome to come and share with us. They do not receive pressure from their peers and in fact are often supported for coming over... It is presented as God as you know him.

*Phil, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

I was the shy guy that would hide from large crowds and not talk to anyone because I would get so nervous no one could hear me. Well due to this group and its strength in energy, love, compassion, and openness I've grown out of that state and into one that I can express myself not only in speech but in words as well... The solitude and silence that can come over such a large group of people all at one time is such an incredible sight and feeling that one has to experience it to live it.

*Anthony, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

Early on I struggled with many thoughts and emotionally charged feelings. I have since learned that this is a natural part of meditation... Now I experience great times of peace, joy, and love deep within.

*Don, California Institute for Men, Chino, Calif.*

Centering prayer is my doorway to finding "peace." It is the true nourishment that people, places, and things cannot provide me; only communion with God in privacy can.... Whispering to myself or sitting there "thinking about what I want" is not God speaking. But after I finish my prayer and meditation, I feel "different...."

*Richard, Mule Creek Prison, Calif.*

I had practiced meditation in my teens as part of my hippie phase only to abandon it... but the Folsom Contemplatives gave me more than a meditation practice. It is the opportunity to share the common journey in an uncommon way, with a group of men who have the shared experience of some of the most horrible and humiliating lives imaginable, all the hates, suspicions, and fears. To be able to sit in peaceful silence with this circle of men who between them represent most of the races and religions on this planet as we walk on this path from humiliation to humility... is to know the awesome grace of the Big Empty. Today I walk this prison yard with a smile on my face, kindness in my heart and peace at my back.

*K.B., Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

How can a prisoner's heart "change" if prisons are nothing more than hate factories? Look how meditation softened and transformed my own heart! Something wonderful happens when a resentful and bitter heart becomes softened through meditation and dharma books. My mind desires to do no harm to any human being. I have stopped hating society, and I have stopped hating myself.

*Tom, Atascadero State Prison, Calif.*

This place was no joke. So much violence and death! You see things and never see them. You need to let it go and I found it through meditation. I was deeply in love with my wife and she found someone out there and it destroyed me. But due to prayer and meditation I was able to let go... and let God...this helps out with those who want to kick drugs and alcohol. Meditation brings relief to those who lost hope.

*Jim, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

Now, when a strong emotion manifests in my mind, I focus my attention below my navel and practice deep breathing. If I feel anger towards another person, I remember that they suffer just like me. I remain calm, embrace my anger, and do my best to water the seeds of understanding and compassion residing in my consciousness. Before too long the emotion passes. I am finding these practices come easier as time passes. I still have a long road ahead of me, but I am growing more mindful on a daily basis.

*Chris, Ariz.*

The course you have created offered a clear and practical application to spiritual growth. It effectively demonstrates to the average layman the innate awareness of Truth within us all. And the use of various belief systems validates, adds to the purity, and amplifies what is Truth.

*Walter, Old Folsom Prison, Calif.*

Prison is a very stressful place. The hard life I was living had a lot of violence. I tattooed my violent way of life all over my body. I lived that way of life—I talked the talk and walked the walk. Prison life is very full of negative energy, some people actually thrive on it. I myself just woke up every morning for many years waiting for the evil to move my way. I was afraid of change, or should I say afraid that if I found a place inside me that was truly good and spiritual, what would happen to the old me? What would happen to the survival skills I had learned to make part of my everyday life? Would I be outcast? I filled my head up with a lot of reasons not to change or try something that would help me. I look back at my life now and wish my heart and my entire being could have been the way I am now! I like the warm and peaceful feelings it gives me. I can escape the prison walls whenever I want, just by sitting on the floor and letting it all flow. I think that the man who was afraid to change, has!

*Billy, California Men's Colony,  
San Luis Obispo, Calif.*

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

*Huero, California Men's Colony,  
San Luis Obispo, CA*