

# Meditation After Folsom

By Mark Maxey

What a joy to read the article "Meditation in Folsom" in the August/September issue of *Radical Grace*. I too was in Folsom Prison, a convicted felon serving a six-year sentence. More importantly, I was a member—from its inception until my release in the fall of 1997—of the Contemplative Fellowship group featured in that article. My success on parole and in my personal life can be totally attributed to the meditation and disciplines I learned in this group.



The human psyche is naturally broken down within the repressive environment of prison walls. Low self-esteem, negative peer pressure, and little or no family contact all demoralize a person's spirit. One begins to feel abandoned by God and that there is no redemptive hope for the soul. My inner journey began with some Buddhist teachings that inspired

in me a desire to somehow get right with God. Eventually a community volunteer introduced a small group of us to centering prayer meditation as taught in *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating, a Cistercian monk who truly "walks the talk." I read the book and cried. Keating calls it "Prayer of the Heart" because it reaches to the deepest core of our being.

All I know is that the daily meditation practice prescribed by Keating transformed my life. Joy and happiness, the desire to live right and to fellowship moment by moment with God—these began to infiltrate the fabric of my being. I saw gradual changes in my thinking, direction, and goals as they became more godly and spiritually oriented. Never before had these elements of character been present in my life.

As we quieted our minds and began to rest in God's love, all ethnic and religious barriers broke down. A non-violent ethic began to permeate our fellowship.

The same thing was happening to the other men in our fellowship, all convicted felons, all of us growing together. We were prisoners learning how to be free on the *inside*, looking forward to our Friday night group meetings. By the time I was paroled, we had more than 60 members; now the group has over 150 members and is growing every day.

I still laugh when I recall the prison guards shaking their heads after peering in and seeing 40 to 60 men sitting silently in a circle around a small lit candle. In a place overrun with prejudice and mistrust, we were an extraordinary mixture of Blacks, Whites, Mexicans, Buddhists, Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and more. As we quieted our minds and began to rest in God's love, all ethnic and religious barriers broke down. A non-violent ethic began to permeate our fellowship. We became brothers and recognized our need to support each other in our journey together. Just crossing paths in the cellblocks or out in the yard was a blessing.

But it hasn't been easy. We have all had to take a hard look at the rancid fruit produced by our past actions including the pain and trauma we've caused our victims, their families, friends, and communities, not to mention our own families. But merely seeing the ugliness—even hating it and desperately wanting to change—is not enough to accomplish real change. The wounds are too deep. That's exactly why centering prayer works; it digs down to the deepest recesses of our being—the unconscious—the place where real healing occurs. Keating calls it Divine Therapy.

I've been out of prison for almost a year now,

having returned to Oklahoma City where I hold a responsible job and am well respected in the community. People who knew me before are in awe of the changes I have made, and continually comment on the joy and love they see in my actions. I am living proof of the transformation that is possible when volunteers bring contemplative meditation into prisons. I know the power of this ministry; so does my family, my parole officer, and my employer. My father said to me, "Mark, whatever it is you're doing, don't ever stop." My parole officer said, "Mark, I know you will never return to prison—you're one of the few who will beat the odds." And I believe she is right. Because as long as I continue to nourish my soul every day, prayerfully quieting my mind and communing with my God, the desire to disrespect myself or anyone else is gone.

**Communing with God each and every day is our freedom. It doesn't matter where we are. This is the freedom we have all longed for.**

If I were able to talk to my brothers in Folsom Prison right now I would say this: Before hitting the streets, have your daily meditation practice securely in place. Readjusting to society after years in prison is hard enough, but losing your spiritual support system may weaken your daily practice. If you can't find a weekly fellowship to join, begin one yourself - you only need two or three to get started. Your daily meditation will be more important than ever when you are released; it will ease the stress and give you the strength to stand up to all you'll have to face. Remember, communing with God each and every day is our freedom. It doesn't matter where we are. This is the freedom we have all longed for.

And to my brothers serving life sentences, the "lifers" in Contemplative Fellowship, I say thank you for reaching out to me and to so many others. You are clearly the cornerstone of our fellowship. You're continually in my prayers. Namaste.

Finally, to our society at large I want to say

I know we do not deserve your forgiveness, but please do not give up on us. You are going to see Contemplative Fellowship groups like ours in more and more prisons. As this occurs, more and more convicts will be leaving those prisons armed not with guns and knives or hatred and bitterness, but instead with a new, non-violent way of thinking and a daily meditation practice. For these parolees, returning to prison will not be the norm but the rare exception. Please support these prison ministries and the men and women who come out of them. Had it not been for Contemplative Fellowship at Folsom, I would not be where I am today. God gave me a second chance, and my daily spiritual disciplines have taught me the meaning of true freedom.

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*If you would like to explore the possibility of starting a Contemplative Fellowship program in a prison near you, or helping with essential library materials for this ministry, contact Mike Kelley, Contemplative Fellowship, P.O. Box 441, Folsom, CA 95763-0441.*

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