

Reviews

Book Review

Peace Inside — A Prisoner's Guide to Meditation

By: Sam Settle (ed)

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In this friendly and accessible book, Sam Settle, Director of the Prison Phoenix Trust (PPT), provides a beginner's guide to the principles of meditation. Containing a foreword by the poet and PPT patron Benjamin Zephaniah, and featuring helpful illustrations by Pollyanna Morgan, *Peace Inside* combines concise instructions with candid prisoner testimony.

The book is split into two parts. The first, divided into five chapters, deals with the practicalities of meditation. Chapter 1 explains what meditation is and isn't, by dispelling some of the fallacies associated with the practice. Of particular use to beginners is an explanation of the links between meditation and religion, assuring us that while many religions allow and encourage meditation, faith is by no means a prerequisite for experiencing its benefits. Chapter 2 offers simple step-by-step instructions on how to meditate, including an explanation on the particulars of breathing and descriptions of related exercises requiring different levels of difficulty. Information is given on how to arrange the posture, eyes and hands, and on how to manage a wandering attention. The following two chapters expand on this theme by including information on external distractions, providing advice on how to maintain the correct approach when meditating and listing principles known to help individuals stay on track. Particular emphasis is placed on the value of simply accepting whatever thought or emotion is dominating the mind, before brief explanations are given about the specific benefits which this acceptance engenders.

If one criticism could be levelled at *Peace Inside* it would be that Chapter 4, which lists the more conventional distractions associated with meditation, reiterate the points discussed in the previous chapter. The section would arguably read better if the chapters were combined or even switched, as, confusingly, Chapter 3 offers solutions to issues which are then expanded on in Chapter 4. This is a minor criticism, however, and Part one concludes with a brief essay on meditation in day-to-day life in which Settle describes the benefits of how meditative principles can affect everyday perceptions. He assures the reader that by harnessing the proper temperament and a hyper-sensitivity of our senses, the sights, smells and sounds of our daily life can render our environment a much more rewarding place in which to live.

Part two of *Peace Inside* is easily the larger portion of the book. Epistolary in format it is comprised of correspondences between volunteers from the PPT, and individuals in prisons and secure hospitals. The letters are sectioned into six categories: 'Anger'; 'Hope'; 'Love'; 'Being with the Blues'; 'Out of the Madness' and 'Gratitude', each of which Settle prefaces with an insightful narrative into how meditation can impact on prisoners' lives. As expected, meditation is indeed an invariable theme woven throughout the exchanges, although the accounts of the men and women at the heart of these undoubtedly give *Peace Inside* an appeal and a value far surpassing that of a simple meditation guidebook. In parts edifying and amusing, in others brave and cathartic, part two catalogues some of the issues familiar to many prisoners who are struggling to make sense of an often alien and uncooperative system. Correspondents discuss themes ranging from drug addiction and sexual abuse to the

ostensibly trivial gripes of withheld mail and cell sharing—one man recounts the frustration of living with an inconsiderate cellmate, while another describes finding serenity and contentment despite having to share his Bangkok cell with 50 other men. Many of the correspondences span lengthy periods, enabling the reader to follow the prisoners' journey of recovery and self-discovery, and, in the case of Darren, his progression through the system from Wakefield's infamous Cage to his eventual graduation from a PIPE (Psychologically Informed Planned Environment) unit.

Ultimately, *Peace Inside* succeeds both as a practical introduction to meditation and as a journal of the ways in which the practice has benefited individuals' lives. Settle's uncomplicated style ensures that the instructions in part one are clear and easy to follow, while Pollyanna Morgan's illustrations provide a charming supplement to the text. The correspondences in part two, featuring testimony from prisoners, reflect the kindness of the PPT volunteers who greet their struggles with friendship and support, together providing a connectivity and a resolution for prisoners who might be experiencing similar issues. Refreshingly, the book does not promote meditation as a panacea, instead opting to underscore the dedication required to allay the frustrations the practice evokes in even the most experienced practitioner; nor is it a guide about yoga, a point that Settle is quick to highlight, with the PPT already providing free books and CDs on this discipline. It primarily being aimed at prisoners, *Peace Inside* is a simple and engaging guide suitable for anybody interested in learning about how meditation can affect their life.

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