**Folsom Prison Class Testimonials: Retreat and Banquet, 2017**

**George R.:**  My practice allows me to make choices, not react. It is such a big part of my life. I see how we each have a story that will benefit others. I feel like I can be a part of life. T’ai Chi Chih helps me to get away from the madness of life, to a place where I can feel who I really am. *[GR is our class recruiter – and he does a great job!]*

**Thornton W.:** When I was checking out the flyer for this class that was posted on the bulletin board in my building, the other guys were saying, “Aw, that’s just a bull-\*#^! class.,” but I went ahead and signed up anyway. The slow movements shift me to a good place, where I feel peace. There is a huge burden lifted off me. I have met a lot of good friends in here, and have learned how to relate to people from diverse backgrounds.

**Raymond M.:**  This practice has given me an experience I’ve never had in my life – a peace of mind that gets me through my day. This is such a stressful place, but this class helps me to get through it.

**Lonyae T.:** I’ve spent 19 years in different prisons, taking different classes. I came to Folsom, and felt frustrated because I didn’t feel led, called to do anything at Folsom State Prison. Then GR told me to try out this class. I want to do yoga, but on the streets, once I get out. I just had a negative attitude about Folsom. But he kept nagging me, so I figured I’d just do one class. Well this class has been a saving grace for me. It is like I’ve found why I’m at Folsom, what I’m here for. I feel the chi flowing – it’s amazing. I’ve tried to explain it to my family. I send copies of our handouts to them. They aren’t sure what to think of it, but I hope to give them a taste of it.

**Brian R.:** I’m kinda quiet. [The men smile, and few laugh quietly and nod encouragingly.) But I really enjoy this class and the people in it. Yes you may use my comment. I enjoy the class and the beautiful energy all around me while I’m there. I gives me peace of mind and brings calm and serenity to my life. It helps me deal with being in prison and being away from my family. It’s hard to describe in words but I do my best. I am fairly new to the class and still have a lot to learn, but I’m looking forward to it and to carry what I’ve learned to my family and community back home. Thank you for this wonderful teaching and practice.

**Steve R.:** I’ve been here 3 years and the time has gone by quickly. I have found a calmness and peace here in this class. Something is different about me. A burden is lifted and physical stress is better. On Thursdays I get 2 hours of quiet. When I concentrate on the movements it slows down my mind and gives me an inner peace that I’m grateful for. I’m more aware of, in touch with my body. I’m very thankful to you ladies for what we have here.

**Lawrence H.:** I feel tears of joy and gratitude today. This practice is hard to put into words – the words are so difficult to find. The change taking place in me is not happening in words. If feel like there is no longer an offensive or defensive part of me. I put myself in harmony with the energy of the universe and with other people without conflict. When I do the moves, it does something on a subliminal level, like magic. Life gets better and better the more I practice. I do TCC on the yard, on the tier, anywhere I can. I’m too big to do it in my cell though. In class, when we hit that right momentum, the universe stops – what’s in my head, the universe is taking care of me. Being in harmony with the energy, everything always works out. This energy has the power to transform the world. We are moving with people all over the world today, harmonizing the whole planet and all of existence. Judy is an angel. Julie brings in some of heaven and Mari brings in some of earth. What a gift.

**Tabu S.:** I’ve been doing some kind of meditation all of my life. It’s good to be with people who are like-minded, centered and peaceful. This class is life transforming. Coming here and filling up on the energy is beautiful. Even when I can’t make it to class, I can feel the energy coming from this Chapel.

**Rick M.:** I’ve been doing this class for a few years, and it helps me to keep growing. Life just gets better and better. I get serenity, a sense of groundedness and stability. I learn to grasp the Now, to be content in the moment. This class is very enjoyable for me.

**Aben A.:** I’ve been in class 3 months but I’ve been reading up on Taoism. I feel the Chi and it’s amazing. My fingertips begin to sweat! It’s this icy/hot feeling. I showed Mari because I was so excited about it. I love the diversity of this class. It takes me beyond cultural boundaries and connects me on a spiritual level with you guys.

**David H.:** In this class I feel an internal cleansing, like a shower. I feel grounded and refreshed. I do it every day in my cell. I grew up doing movements like these with my Grandma and my Mom, but I didn’t know what it was – this class has given a face to it – to what I grew up with in a small village in Fiji. My village was loving and hospitable but other villages were violent and would attack us. I’ve come to Folsom from level 4 *[highest level in prison system]* and I have over 100 stab wounds on my body. I’m sensitive to people’s energy – and this class is healing the wounds I have on the inside, that no MRI is going to show. Like having a broken heart, like when my wife passed away, no one can see it, but it can heal. This class centers and balances me and contributes to my 24 years of sobriety from heroin. It heals the pain from my childhood, and the pain from my addiction – I haven’t felt this peaceful in a long time. I wake up and choose to be peaceful. The flow of these gentle movements are the opposite of prison, of how my dad was always, “Get in there and fight!” But now I have softness and continuity, and this is not weak, it is strong. I can’t see myself NOT doing it every day. It’s my medicine. It’s how I get high now.

**Robert C.:** I work for the Sports Department, and one of my jobs is being a referee, which is really stressful. There are guys yelling at me all the time. This class is my sanctuary, where I get a sense of peace, calmness and harmony. It helps me to find peace in myself. Julie came in here on her spiritual journey and shares that with us. I feel a sense of being grounded, feeling the earth and sky, harmonizing, like music. I meditate and find my center. Here I can think clearly, without all the chaos. On Thursdays I can check-out mentally from all of it, and feel my body healing too. I process, take my time, and now I feel the energy in my hands. It’s been a slow process, but now I believe in myself. When I practice, I am free.

**Richard P.:** This is very new for me, but I definitely feel like something is here. Something is happening with me. I notice that out there (on the yard) I’m getting angry faster. I feel more emotional. But in here, in this class, something happens. This is something I’ve been looking for, for a long time. It’s a way to feel happy. It’s what’s been missing in my life. Something I need no matter how my day goes. I’m really thankful for this class.

**Gilbert S.:** Today is our one day a year when you all come in, when we all get together and visit with guests, eat good food. I have to admit that part of me is here for the food! It is SO great to eat some good food. I’ve been taking other classes recently, but have been missing the T’ai Chi Chih energy. Even after all these years, over 10 years, this energy is still a mystery to me – how it moves around and through – it’s amazing. I have so many thoughts on my mind all the time, but this meditation, doing 45 minutes of the movements, when I leave here I leave transformed. I’m not the same Gilbert. I feel a lot of peace – I feel it in my gut. I come in with an empty cup and get filled up. There is this complete transformation that’s hard to put into words. You just have to experience it. Julie I will answer your question by saying that I am here for 2 things. First of all, this is the one day of the year when I have the pleasure of having all five of you’re here. Secondly for the food . Who doesn’t love to eat good food, and you always bring something good for us. I have been taking some classes for a new GED and for this reason I come late to class on Thursday, but I must say that we have something magical with this tcc class because of the ay the energy moves from one leg to the other, to the kidneys, I mean all over our body, even after all these years I can’t fully explain what I’m feeling in my body. I come here to the chapel, lately late, with many thoughts with a very busy mind, but when I leave this chapel I am transformed. I am not the same Gilbert that walked in 2 hours ago. The peace that I feel is undeniable and unexplainable, I do believe that we have something special here but in order for you to feel this transformation first, you need to learn all of the moves. This will come after a few years of practice. Second you must practice in order to feel the transformation that I feel. When you do the above you will be able to go at your own speed then you can feel this trans every time that you practice. Practice is important to become sensitive to the energy. In my opinion practice is the only way to experience this powerful energy. Thank you to the people now and those before them that have made this class possible.

**Tyrone J.:** We sit here together, *[his voice breaks and tears are in his eyes]* and we ARE a CIRCLE OF LIGHT! This morning during this share, and in class, I’ve received SO much from everyone here. It fills up my tank and brings joy to a hollow world. I give thanks to you teachers, and this circle of guys. Thank you.

**Jonathon R.:** You ladies are like a little string that connects us to out there. I believe things happen for a reason. Sure no one wants to be in prison, but being in this class – I feel things happen on time. When I saw this practice on the prison t.v., I knew it was a sign. I started coming, and I experience it as a chance to share a moment of life with others. When I’m doing the practice, I’m not like a sponge, but it creates a filter. A filter for the bad thoughts that are all around this place. Wisdom is a moment to cherish and notice. We keep the practice simple and easy, and everything gets better. I needed to get broken down so that I could get better. This practice is like healing a broken bone. Once healed, it’s stronger than it was before. We develop an inner muscle here that balances you – not too strong, not too weak. When I see these guys from class out on the yard, there is this connection we share. We just nod, and we know. Today we are connected, all over the world at the same time. My dad was a Kung Fu addict – the Asian way of living. I’m learning to listen beyond the prison chaos, to the Universal energy that connects and completes us. Prisons in Mexico are much worse, we could all have it much worse. We are the filter for this energy, we have healing power to share with others. We just need to stay connected. This is what I want to do on the streets. To share this.

**Harvey J.:** I’ve been doing this practice for 10 years, and it’s been THE most life changing class of anything else I’ve ever done. It’s better than all the other courses in prison put together. In four weeks I’ll find out if I’m leaving this place. When I’m on the outside, I want to pay for the cost of this banquet. *[Unbeknownst to us, the banquet was our last practice with Harvey. He left the next Thursday morning before class, and he will be missed.]*

**Sam S.:** Franky Carrillo is the one who got me into this class. He was my cellie before he left here for good. I’ve been before the Board 10 times and been denied parole. Before I didn’t really care, but this last time I was really upset. This practice helps me to release my anger, to let go of it. It took my Dad 20 years to recognize the changes in me. I’m grateful for this class and you all.

**Steven F.:** I’ve been in this class for 4 years. I came in after the Law Library closed, and started doing these movements. Now I have a center point in my life, and it’s T’ai Chi Chih. On the tier I will mirror Lawrence doing the movements from across the cell block. Other guys will yell, “Hey, what are you doing? You look funny!” But I don’t care. The pain in my body is gone and I feel good. I used to be filled with anger and hate, I was very aggressive. But now I’m able to quiet down, pray, do my movements, and I don’t have those feelings any more. I come EVERY week – I never miss a class. It’s my life. When Julie started testing us for the certificates, and when I got all three, I felt like this paper says, “I AM T’ai Chi Chih.” Not just here in class. On the inside. When I ‘m here I feel connected with the Universe. I feel this community with the guys here. We see each other on the yard, and even though we move in different circles, we know who we are. No words are needed. When I get out I want to be a teacher, to pass this along to others; to share this calm. Once you have it, it stays with you. Like your spirit senses you are a part of something.

**Mike G.:** I’m the clerk for this Chapel, and it’s a very thankless job. I do all of the paper work for programs in here, for all of the banquets, etc., and I catch all the flack when something goes wrong. Right now is event season in the Chapel, and so I don’t get to be in class as much as I’d like. But you guys, you ALWAYS show your appreciation for what I do for the class. [*Mike sets up all the chairs, lays out the handouts, sets up the music and library before class starts, and then goes back to his office, because he doesn’t have time to practice].* One of the things I love about this class is the comradery and brotherhood that exists here. Any moment I can get in class gets my brain quiet. I can just be, with no demands. A few moments here, makes my entire week.

**Herman R.:** Prison is a very adverse environment, with a lot of stress. I can get pretty angry – rage – but here I can get myself grounded and balanced. I find that center. There is so much that goes on in my mind, and this class really helps me out.

**Timothy D.:** GR invited me to this class, so I decided to check it out, maybe just come once. Maybe just see a demo. I came into prison when I was 17. I was tried as an adult and given 2 life sentences. I did martial arts very early on in life, began when I was 7. I had some famous teachers, but the focus was always on aggression. There was no focus on balance, polarity, softness or peace. The purpose of engagement was always to be on the offensive or defensive. This ingrained aggression through martial arts got me in serious trouble, starting in elementary school. My elementary school sued my mother because I had seriously injured another student. I believe it’s so important in martial arts to have balance with something like T’ai Chi Chih. As I began to focus on different movements in here – I had a quick appreciation for how peaceful I felt. I felt the effects very quickly. I took all the handouts and books to my cell and studied. I shared with my Mom about it. This practice has added a new, constructive dimension to me. I’ve been trying very hard to reform myself for a long time, and the balance, polarity, softness – these are all things I’ve needed in my life. I recently went before the Parole Board (I’ve been in prison 31 years) and they looked at the letter *[chrono]* Julie wrote, and they focused on this class. They asked me about my certificate, and asked me about the Six Healing Sounds. I demonstrated them, and I told them about my class, and Justin Stone, and the history of it. I demonstrated the movements and the principles, and shared about how my lifelong practice had been violent and aggressive but now my life is about peacefulness. I said that now I can take this with me. The Board was impressed. They saw how it’s had a genuine effect on me, and the Board found me suitable for parole. Our instructor, you can really feel the peace that Julie has – that it’s not just talk – you can feel it. I also like about this class, how we can be with people from diverse backgrounds. You ladies who started this class, you started something very profound. That we are here with different religious backgrounds, etc., joining together and doing this in harmony; it’s something this place really needs.

**Lyman S.:** Even though I’ve been doing this practice a little while now, I am a baby still. I’ve always been drawn to these types of practices. Here in class, this is Life. It’s healing, and it’s light. It allows us to live apart from the chaos, to stay focused and grounded. It allows one to ground himself and meditate and become one with the Universe. I’m so glad to be here. I feel like we are all teachers and students. This class feels like being part of a family. We practice together, and grow together through T’ai Chi Chih. It’s just beautiful. Let’s do this!

**Joe G.:** I’ve been in this class for about 3 years or more. I grew up in the unsettled 60’s, in the Vietnam era, a time of mass incarceration. I’m not that idealistic – that what changes me will change the world or even the people within a 30 foot radius of me. The world is the world, but doing this class makes it all more understandable, more bearable. I’m a 3-striker: 25 to life for victimless crimes; done 24 years of 66. All that I’ve lost in the process, friends, the death of my twin brother – it’s hard. In the 70’s I saw people doing Tai Chi in the park, in SF and New York, and I always wanted to be a part of that but never had the time. I’m here, and this practice is different, but the sincerity of the people doing it and those who’ve brought it to us – those are the main reasons I’ve stayed. I helps to keep the monsters at bay. I’m a seriously cranky guy. More than anything else, it’s the humanity of the people here – and I’m learning to get that back for myself. I need to keep the genie in the bottle. I’ll be alright when I get out of here. Until then, this helps so much. Thanks to you all: you ladies, and you guys.

**Sandy:** What comes to my mind, above all else, as I sit here once again with all of you, is transformation. This week has been one of transformation for me; of change. A few days ago I attended the funeral of my first T’ai Chi Chih teacher: my teacher of 23 years. She had requested that her memorial begin with 10 minutes of T’ai Chi Chih, and so I had the privilege of leading that practice. She has transformed, from this body, this vehicle, to her next adventure. And now I’m here with you, another day of being part of and witnessing transformation. And on Saturday it is World T’ai Chi and Qigong Day, which is a global day of practice, meditation, prayer and healing. It certainly is a powerful week for me.

**Tara:** T’ai Chi Chih has been an essential part of my life for decades. I love the simplicity of it. I do Rocking Motion everywhere and anywhere. I find that doing T’ai Chi Chih is intrinsically pleasurable. There is a sweetness about it, a blend of accessing the body – being IN my body – as a vehicle for my spirit, in such a good and easy way. T’ai Chi Chih gives me a portal to the invisible realm, to the web we are all part of. I get glimpses of this massive Chi we all live in and work with. Even though I’ve been doing it for a long time, I know I’m really just a baby in this process. I want you to know that above all else, today I am here to be of service to you guys in any way I can. I thank you all for showing up*. [Tara started the class here in the prison in 1998, and today she spent a lot of time working on the Taffy’s with a few guys.]*

**Julie:** I’m so grateful for this experience, for each of you, for the people you are. Sandy mentioned transformation – well, I’m certainly not the person I was when I came in here 8 years ago. In fact, every Thursday when I leave here, I’m not the person who came into the Chapel that day. I started on this path with a T’ai Chi Ch’uan practice – had practiced 7 years before discovering T’ai Chi Chih. But when I heard the voice of Divine Wisdom/Intuition that brought me here, I’d been sober two years. I know I share the path of sobriety with many of you here. When we stop numbing ourselves to our feelings, when we can get still long enough to listen, there is so much wisdom waiting for us. I felt SO many waves of chi flowing through this circle as you guys were sharing just now. I’m so grateful for the sense of safety YOU have all created in this community – so that you can share who you really are, so I can be who I really am. I am so grateful to be on this healing journey, with all of its struggles and joys, with all of you. Thank you for bringing your authentic selves to this class. That’s what makes it so magical!

**Judy:** It’s so rewarding to me to be a part of this class. Some people are not here anymore, but there are a few familiar faces here. I taught this class with love and passion for many years. Julie has added some other things that I didn’t have the time for, and it’s good to see that. It’s beautiful to see how everyone continues to benefit from this class, and it was an honor to carry it for so long. It will always be a huge part of me, and I’ll be connected to it – to you all – in spirit and love, wherever I go.