

Prison Yoga : Freedom Behind Bars?

On World Yoga Day...a look at how yoga programs for prisoners are creating a space for self reflection, peace and wellness. .

San Quentin prison in California is home to 4,000 male inmates out of which 700 are on the dreaded Death Row. Ironically enough, every morning, a group of hardened criminals gather in a nondescript room and begin an intense 30-minute intense yoga session. The group is always positioned in a semi-circle, with “nobody standing behind anyone’s back”. In a tense and fraught prison environment this can cause fear and tension. In this yoga class, body contact is strictly avoided and teachers refrain from making physical adjustments during the session; each individual is given ample physical space to practice freely. The overall emphasis lies on calming the nervous system with freestyle asanas, to create a sense of balance and a better attunement with the harsh environs of prison life. Unlike other regular yoga classes, a frisson of mild fear runs in this one. A gentle, kindly teacher has to get these hulking six-foot tall men, with a history of cracking a skull or two, into lotus position. And more importantly, he has to keep them there, convince them that this will make a difference to their lives behind bars. The slightest misunderstanding over a word or a gesture can cause the infamous ripple effect in jail, which then becomes the tidal wave effect, aka total mayhem. An armed guard is therefore always present.

When I think about yoga and my own daily practice, I think of an open, bright room, concentrated but smiling faces, the strong collective sound of breath, and finally, the burst of physical and creative energy that engulfs me and peaks once I’m done with the

very last pose – a restful shavasana. I leave the shala as if I'm walking on air and the day stretches ahead with endless possibility. Sure, I have writing deadlines, calls to make, the odd muscular pain in my shoulder after rigorous twists and bends, stuff to sort out, including the coffee in my hand that has clumsily spilt.

But I feel a deep surge of freedom, an “it'll all work out” sensation of hope.

This surge of freedom, this sense of hope and a new mindfulness is what yoga practitioner James Fox felt was lacking for prisoners across American jails. In 2002, he founded the Prison Yoga project, targeting prisoners with varying degrees of Complex Trauma or past experiences of abandonment, assault or abuse.

Fox has the unflinching belief that yoga reduces the “aggressive-reactive” elements of the brain and makes for calmer, more empathetic responses when interacting with others. He is often confronted with a fundamental question at work : yoga and prison are two concepts at odds with one another – one represents freedom even in the highest spiritual realm while the other stands for captivity in the basest physical sense. How can they possibly work together? The answer lies in the writing of teacher Eric Paskel. Eric argues that they are meant to work together if you begin thinking of yoga as more than just poses. Yoga is about getting out of jail mentally even as your physical body remains trapped.

In 2009, Mike Higgins, an MBA from Wharton and a successful corporate executive, found himself pleading guilty to a financial misdemeanor. His life changed with his nine-month sentence. Mike went from being a high-flying, socially prominent businessman to

a nameless, faceless prison serial number. The worst part was the shame and the guilt he faced every moment of the endless days and sleepless nights he endured.

Mike had been familiar with a few yoga postures in his youth, and now he started practicing them again in his cramped cell. It gave him something to do and made him feel calmer, and soon, with permission, he gathered a small group together in the communal yard. There was resistance at first; many of the other inmates – hardened felons – scoffed at yoga, made catcalls and could not bring themselves to concentrate at all. But Mike encouraged them, and over time, learnt that regular practice tamed the violent and snap impulses that governed many of these criminal minds. When Mike was released in 2012, he launched the **Transformation Yoga Project** which today targets yoga therapy and meditation specifically at recovering addicts, war veterans and people with criminal records looking to restart their lives. The emphasis is on creating awareness by guiding individuals towards a better understanding of themselves, why they made the choices they did, and how they can make wiser choices in the future.

With women, says yoga teacher, therapist and dancer Josefin Wikstrom, the issues are somewhat different, but equally challenging. Wikstrom has taught at Sweden's largest prison for women for the last six years. Most of the inmates have experienced rape and sexual abuse. Wikstrom avers that regular modified yoga has greatly benefited these women by bringing about physical and mental calm, hormonal balance, less anxiety and aggression, and better sleep. She herself has learnt a great deal as a teacher. We avoid the "happy baby" pose, for example, Wikstrom says, because many women in prison are separated from their children and the pose can cause sadness and painful memories.

I personally love yoga for its rigorous discipline; its obvious gifts of strength and flexibility and muscle tone. A deeper inner awareness will come with time and consistent practice, and I have accepted that without too much thought. I'm enjoying myself too much, relishing the burst of physical energy and mental creativity after each session, the way in which this centres me as a writer and as a person with lots to do, places to go, people to meet. Therefore, self reflection and acceptance – that fundamental and very tricky essence of yoga – has for me been more of a leisurely option, less a life-saving compulsion. But then, I am free. Not free in absolute terms, of course, but a whole lot freer than someone locked in a tiny cell, doing time for murder or robbery or violent assault, wondering if there could possibly be a ray of hope or a glimmer of liberation in the dark prison that is the mind.

And nowhere is the darkness and entrapment more suffocating than in Indian prisons. Two of the country's largest prisons – Tihar Jail in Delhi and Arthur Road prison in Mumbai – are overcrowded, dirty and violent. Most inmates are undertrials : poor, uneducated and without legal support. Self reflection, in their case, is of little use in the face of mounting despair. And trained teachers willing to volunteer time and effort are hard to come by.

But Mohan Kumar's story is one of triumph over the odds. Mohan had served 12 years at Bangalore Central Jail when he became one of 30 inmates taking part in a special project. This was a 90-day yoga and meditation course introduced by the Art of Living Foundation. Mohan, an aggressive young male, found himself in a calm and positive state of mind by the end of the course; and went on to become a yuvacharya, or a "prison teacher", spreading what he had learnt to other inmates. Today, Mohan has

serious duties in prison – besides teaching and counseling, he manages the jail's meal program. Using Mohan as a positive case study and role model, the AOL Foundation went on to launch its programs across seven major prisons in Karnataka state and has affected close to 2,500 prisoners.

I must confess. While I devote myself to a daily yoga practice, I am skeptical of what I call new-agey spiritual quick fixes. And while I consider a day without yoga incomplete, I don't believe that it alone can mend broken lives. For that you need emotional support, social support, family, friends, meaningful work – and that's hard to come by for prisoners with hard pasts and shaky futures.

And then I come across powerful testimonies like those of S.L., an inmate of San Quentin who is serving a life term for murder. As part of Jamie Fox's Prison Yoga project, S.L has a stunning perspective of how yoga practice can make the worst offenders face themselves, take responsibility for their crimes, and move forward. He says :

We cannot change our reality or our environment. But we can work towards spiritual freedom. Yoga and its emphasis on prana, the vital force, has given me a new respect for life, for the power of a single breath. And I have grown to understand that I extinguished the breath of another human being. Forever.

In truth, prison is no place for self reflection. Very often, criminals succumb to a system that preys on their weaknesses, insecurities and impulses. But this vicious cycle seems to have been broken with the introduction of yoga and meditation programs for inmates.

It offers hope and a path towards real rehabilitation. A second chance at life, a second chance that most embrace with open arms.

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