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Prison Yoga



by James Fox

“Hey Yogaman!” a guy yells as I’m buzzed through the gate at [San Quentin State Prison](#). It’s a Tuesday, 2:30 P.M. I walk onto the yard past two correctional officers leaning against the building as they monitor the outdoor activities of inmates. On the way to the classroom two of my students intercept me, eager to help prepare our makeshift yoga studio. After tables and chairs are stacked, the floor mopped, and mats pulled out of storage, we’re ready for the 90-minute class to begin. I teach three classes weekly at San Quentin, each filled to capacity with 16 men and a waiting list. A fourth will soon be added.

It wasn’t always this way. I used to be greeted with catcalls and whistles as I walked across the yard, yoga mat tucked under my arm. A few guys would show up interested in “stretching.” Most prisoners viewed yoga as a pursuit for sissies. But that was eight years ago.



Over time, my program at San Quentin has gained a considerable reputation among inmates for the physical and mental discipline it requires. The men know that when they come to my class they can learn some practical skills for dealing with the stress, despair and other emotional difficulties of their lives.

“I used drugs and alcohol for many years basically to kill the pain of my life. Yoga has helped clear my mind, deal with the pain, move into the present and just love myself and who I am.” ~Former San Quentin yoga student



I began teaching yoga to the incarcerated in a court-mandated residential treatment program for boys, ages 12 to 18. That experience led to conducting classes in juvenile detention facilities, and in 2002, the Insight Prison Project asked me to establish their yoga program at San Quentin. Since then I've taught over 800 classes to a multi-ethnic population of male prisoners, many of whom show the physical and emotional scars of lives filled with violence and addiction.

"Yoga and its emphasis on the power of a single breath has promoted for me a respect for life and a profound realization of the destructive force of violence." ~Current life-sentenced yoga student

In 2008 I started the Prison Yoga Project with the goal of helping spread yoga and meditation practices to prisons worldwide. In response to requests from students in San Quentin, as well as to inquiries from yoga teachers around the world, in December of 2009, I published an instructional book of yoga and meditation practices designed especially for prisoners. *Yoga A Path for Healing and Recovery* is a practical, step-by-step manual that also features the artwork of San Quentin students. Through a grant from the Give Back Yoga Foundation we were able to print and send an initial 1,000 copies to prisoners free of charge. The Human Kindness Foundation's 2009 holiday newsletter for prisoners announced the availability of the book, and there was a phenomenal response. In just the first six weeks of 2010, we received over 1,500 letters from inmates throughout the country requesting the book and expressing interest in the potential self-rehabilitative benefits of yoga and meditation.



Over the years I've discovered some things that work with this unique population to keep them actively engaged and relating to yoga as a practical tool for enhancing their well-being. In my classes I stress the importance that asana, pranayama and meditation play in helping to develop discipline. I emphasize that yoga can help to develop self-control to interrupt the knee-jerk reactions that lead to drug use and violence. I frequently relate stories from my own life to illustrate how I use the practices for the same purpose. And I remind students that the real practice of yoga occurs outside the classroom, that the multi-dimensional skills they are learning are meant to be applied to their daily lives, whether in prison or on the streets.

Another thing worth mentioning is how much fun it is. For a male yoga instructor it's a rare honor to teach only males, not to mention such a diverse group of men. The combination of eagerness and beginner's mind along with the men's soulfulness makes for a very lively, enriching and rewarding experience. So often I leave prison after teaching a class acknowledging to myself how much I love and appreciate doing this, and the students I get to do it with.

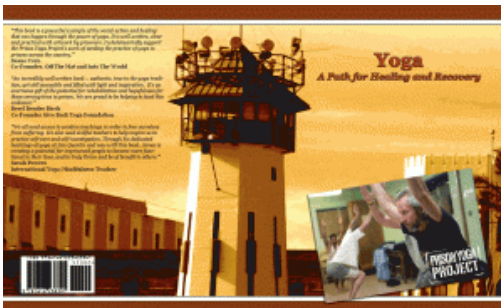
The U.S. incarcerates more people than any country in the world. There are 2.25 million people incarcerated in this country. According to a study conducted by the Pew Charitable Trust in 2008, more than one in every 100 adults are now confined in a U.S. jail or prison. For certain ethnic groups the data is particularly alarming. Approximately 700,000 prisoners are released to society each year; 60% return to prison within 3 years. One of the primary reasons for this is that only a very few prisoners are provided

meaningful programs, education or self-help resources to aid in their rehabilitation.



“The truth is the system is broken and we are not getting the rehabilitation we need to make it in the free world. Some of us see that we need to take our rehabilitation into our own hands if we’re going to make it. I’m glad folks like you are helping to give us some practical tools to work with. I look forward to receiving your book and putting it to use right away.” ~Prisoner at Mule Creek State Prison

To date we have sent 3,612 copies of *Yoga A Path for Healing and Recovery* to prisoners free of charge. Donations from individuals as well as continued support from the Give Back Yoga Foundation enabled us to reprint the book, but we’ve had to continue to raise funds in order to be able to send the manual free of charge. The cost just for shipping and handling is approximately \$2.50 a book and the printing cost is \$2.10. We still receive about 50 requests a week from that single announcement last December. We plan to offer the book again through the Human Kindness Foundation’s newsletter in December 2010 for which we’ll need to be prepared. We still need to raise another \$1,500 for this year, and we plan to offer the book again through the Human Kindness Foundation’s 2010 holiday newsletter. In order to meet the expected demand in 2011, we will need to raise another \$14,000.



“The book ‘Yoga A Path for Healing and Recover’ has changed my life completely. I put it aside at first because I was intimidated by it. But I read the book and started the process and have a beginning sense of real peace and clarity. Thank you from the bottom of my charkas.” ~Prisoner, Stringfellow Unit, Rosharon, Texas

This fall Prison Yoga Project will begin conducting trainings for yoga teachers who are interested in teaching in prisons. The first training will be on November 6 & 7, in Washington D.C., through Yoga Activist (www.yogaactivist.org). We also expect to conduct trainings in the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City during the first quarter of 2011.



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