

PRACTICAL EXERCISES • NUTRITION • MINDFULNESS • LIFESTYLE & WELLNESS

YOGATM MAGAZINE

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FIND BALANCE, EMBRACE, PEACE

रासा
शास्त्रा

ANVI
Rubber Girl of India

YOGA
IN PRISONS

DISCOVER

Shinrin-Yoku

POTENTIAL OF
Perinatal Yoga

THE SOUND OF ॐ



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90 NEW BOOKS, ACCESSORIES AND PRODUCTS



YOGA'S ROLE IN REHABILITATION IN PRISONS

Words: Lynne Jones, BWY DCT Tutor

Photos: Prison Phoenix Trust



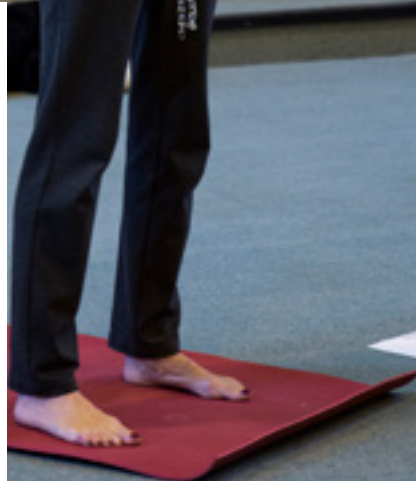


Reducing reoffending is a major challenge for the criminal justice system. With UK prisons reported to be at capacity and 56.1% of adults serving shorter sentences reoffending within a year of being released (Justice Data), creative approaches are needed to equip prison leavers with the tools for sustainable change.

One such approach is yoga, which is emerging as a valuable tool to support rehabilitation and address the complex needs of those within the prison system.

The British Wheel of Yoga (BWY) is committed to bringing yoga's myriad benefits to people who can't access yoga via traditional means. Through the work of the Prison Phoenix Trust, which offers training programmes in collaboration with BWY, yoga classes and resources are now widely available to people in prison and prison staff.

A growing body of evidence highlights yoga's positive impact in prisons. A study by Oxford University reports reduced stress, improved emotional wellbeing, and enhanced cognitive functioning. The Swedish "Krimiyoga" programme also shows reduced levels of aggression and antisocial behaviour alongside improved impulse control and attention span in inmates.



These outcomes show that yoga's benefits extend beyond physical exercise. Having taught yoga in Welsh prisons for over a decade, I have seen firsthand how yoga enhances wellbeing and empowers positive life choices. While people in prison are eager to learn, prison is a challenging environment, and yoga isn't a quick fix. I believe a regular yoga practice can be transformative, especially when supported by the following measures.

TOP FIVE WAYS YOGA CAN BE EFFECTIVE IN PRISONS

Supportive staff

Gaining the support of prison staff is crucial. The Prison Phoenix Trust invited me to attend a 'taster' session they were running at a prison in South

Wales, allowing both staff and people in prison to understand what was involved in yoga practice. Most staff members hadn't done yoga before, so this was a useful tool to explore its potential benefits for people in prison and motivate individuals to join. Following this, I was asked to deliver a weekly yoga class to people in prison.

After each class, I gathered feedback and relayed it to the staff to demonstrate yoga's positive effects. One staff member even created roles for people in prison, giving them responsibility for setting up and tidying away yoga mats.

Knowing the staff and where they are is also important so that you feel safe. I was mindful of the environment I was in and where the staff were if I needed them.

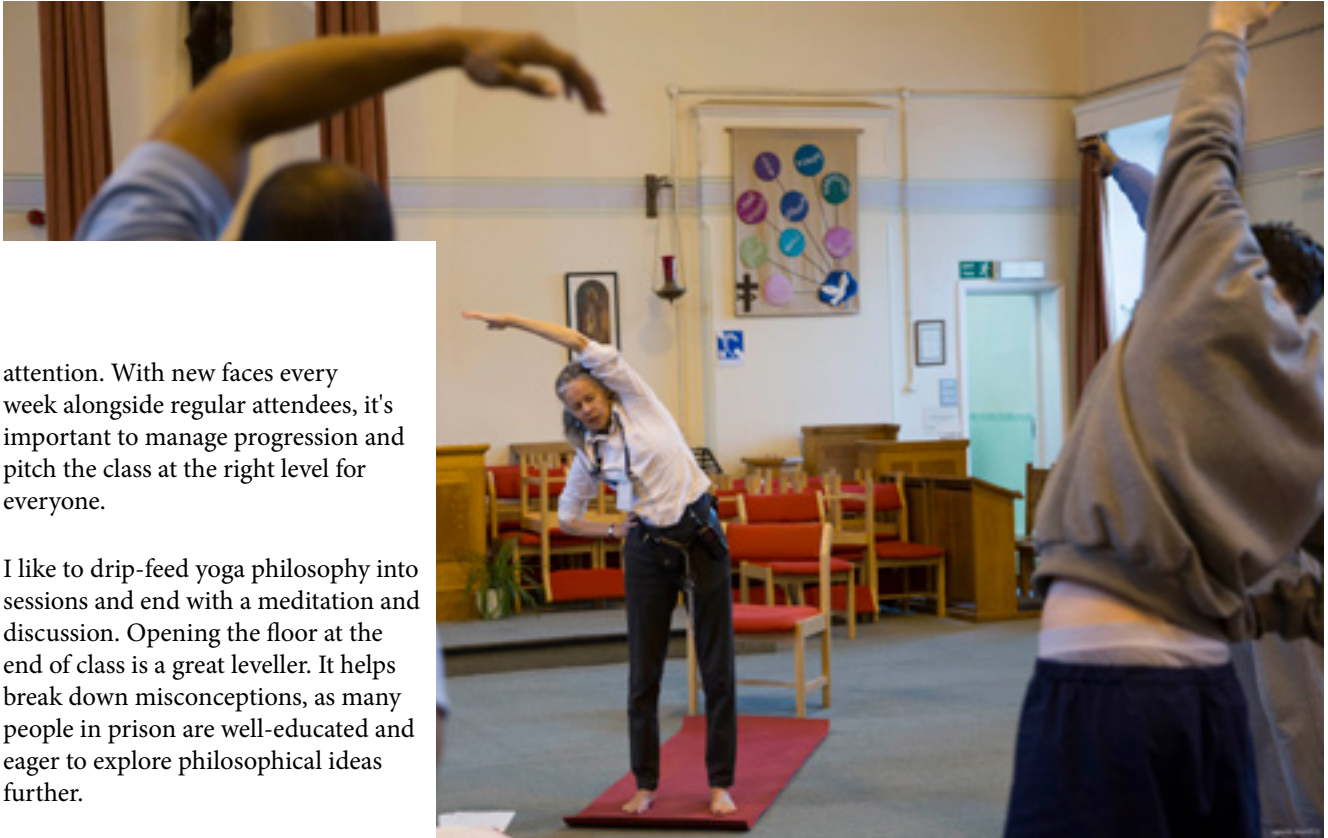
Skilled teachers

Experienced teachers can read bodies, observe non-verbal cues, and ask questions to ensure safe practice. We aren't given detailed case histories, so it is important to pick up group characteristics, ask about injuries, and adapt the plan if necessary.

Sometimes there can be a bit of banter between the men, so setting challenging tasks helps bring their minds back into their bodies. Movement with breath is crucial. In the main, I find that the men are very supportive of each other during the sessions.

I often use Mukha Bhastrika (mouth bellows) with a woodchopper pose to help empty stale air. This rhythmic action involves bringing both hands together above the head and then forcefully down with a 'ha' sound. Linking breath with movement is easier than focusing on breath alone, which can be anxiety-provoking.

Smaller group sizes are beneficial as they allow for more personalised



attention. With new faces every week alongside regular attendees, it's important to manage progression and pitch the class at the right level for everyone.

I like to drip-feed yoga philosophy into sessions and end with a meditation and discussion. Opening the floor at the end of class is a great leveller. It helps break down misconceptions, as many people in prison are well-educated and eager to explore philosophical ideas further.

Encouraging self-practice

Promoting self-practice is essential for yoga's lasting benefits. I provide handouts to guide people in prison in their own practice, and during COVID-19, I recorded videos so they could continue their sessions remotely. The Prison Phoenix Trust also offers an opt-in letter-writing service for ongoing motivation and support.

Yoga is all about practice. To reap its rewards, you have to keep at it. If you practice regularly, you'll see results; if you don't, you won't. I've witnessed incredible transformations in individuals who committed to their practice.

One of my students, a gym leader, began using movement with the breath as part of his gym instruction, becoming an advocate for yoga's benefits. Another prisoner with ADHD arrived at a session wired and anxious, but focusing on movement with breath helped him find peace and stay still during relaxation. He even suggested

that yoga should be prescribed instead of medication for his ADHD!

Encouraging self-practice and providing tools for continuous learning can make a significant difference in the lives of people in prison, helping them find calm and stability in challenging circumstances.

A quiet space

Adapting to available spaces is essential. Prison is an unpredictable environment and things can change at short notice. Sometimes the usual room is unavailable. There was a time when I was asked to run the sessions on the top floor of the wing, which was not ideal. However, on reflection I think it benefitted the men in that they were given the opportunity to settle into themselves in the midst of day-to-day activity going on around them. Yoga is about tuning out the outside world and coming back to inner space. This can be challenging in communal areas with constant activity, yet somehow it worked.

Guided meditation helps people in prison focus on the teacher's voice instead of surrounding distractions. The ability to tune out distractions is a sign of progress in yoga.

Using yoga for prisoner education

Given the stressful environment and inadequate bedding in prisons, back pain is a common problem. Yoga helps by breaking harmful habits and establishing new, healthier movement patterns. Through consistent practice, inmates can experience significant physical improvements, such as reduced pain and increased flexibility.

Beyond the physical benefits, yoga encourages mindfulness, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. These skills are crucial for individuals in prison, as they can help manage stress, reduce aggression, and improve overall mental health.

I've witnessed incredible transformations in individuals who

commit to regular yoga practice. One participant, who initially joined for the physical aspect, found that yoga helped him manage chronic back pain and improved his posture. Another prisoner discovered that yoga's focus on breath and movement helped him cope with anxiety and find a sense of inner calm.

Consistency is key to reaping the full benefits of yoga. Regular classes help inmates develop discipline, build positive routines, and stay motivated. This consistency not only supports physical and mental wellbeing but can potentially help in reducing reoffending rates. When inmates leave prison with a regular yoga practice and other support mechanisms in place, they are better equipped to handle the challenges of reintegration into society.

OPPORTUNITIES OF YOGA IN PRISON REFORM

New research is currently being conducted into the benefits of yoga and meditation in prisons. Leading this review is Professor Rosie Meek, Chartered Psychologist, certified yoga teacher, and the founding Head of the Law School at Royal Holloway University of London. Specialising in Criminal Justice, she has been instrumental in integrating sports and physical activity programmes, including yoga, into the prison system and has made numerous policy recommendations to the Ministry of Justice.

Professor Meek will be presenting an overview of her findings at the BWY-SOAS Autumn Summit Yoga: Health, Harm and Healing on Saturday 2 November at SOAS University of London. Her research and insights will drive new policy changes that will further support the integration of yoga into prison rehabilitation programmes.



Professor Rosie Meek comments: “Having worked with prisons for over 20 years, it is evident that they are now in a state of crisis. Overcrowding, staff shortages, and budget cuts have shifted the focus away from rehabilitation. Both prison staff and people in prison face increased stress due to health issues, past trauma, and increased violence and assaults. With traditional rehabilitative programmes being compromised, there is a clear need for yoga as a tool to promote better mental and physical health for both people in prison and staff.

My review highlights that yoga and meditation significantly improve sleep, a major issue in prisons today. Yoga provides people in prison with a sense of autonomy in an environment where they have very little control. It empowers them to practice independently in their cells or in small groups, helping them to manage their stress and regulate emotions. Those with a history of substance use or with a reliance on prescription drugs have even reported that yoga has enabled them to reduce their medication and/or support their recovery.

Yoga also fosters a better sense of community within prisons by enhancing relationships. Practicing yoga together can help to foster trust and cooperation among people in prison and between people in prison and staff, leading to a more harmonious, prosocial environment.

My work emphasises the importance of making yoga more accessible post-incarceration. To support people in their desistance from crime, it is crucial to collaborate with yoga studios and organisations to offer a financial model that is more accessible to vulnerable individuals. Additionally, I advocate for the implementation of yoga training programmes within prisons so that people in prison and staff can become yoga teachers. This not only upskills prison staff but also provides people in prison – where appropriate - a potential route to employment, a factor that is proven to help reduce reoffending rates.”

With continued research and the dedication of advocates like Professor Meek, the integration of yoga into the criminal justice system has the potential to make a significant

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positive impact, transforming lives and contributing to a safer, more compassionate society.

FIND OUT MORE

If you would like to learn more about yoga's benefits in prison reform, why not come along to the SOAS-BWY Autumn Yoga Summit on 2 November? For further details and to book: [The British Wheel of Yoga \(bwy.org.uk\)](https://portal.bwy.org.uk)

If you are keen to find out more about teaching yoga in prisons, the BWY in collaboration with the Prison Phoenix Trust is offering a course module starting 20 September - <https://portal.bwy.org.uk/user/trainings/284>



Lynne Jones is an experienced yoga and meditation teacher who began her yoga journey in 1994 while working as a software engineer in Silicon Valley. Overcoming her fear of deep water through meditation-inspired swimming lessons, she pursued yoga teacher training with the British Wheel of Yoga (BWY). She has been teaching for over 22 years and has taught diverse groups, including children, adults with special needs, and people in prison at HM Prison Service in South Wales. A BWY Foundation and Diploma Course Tutor, Lynne also offers meditation training for yoga teachers.
Lynne: lynne@artfullyoga.co.uk



A woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a dark tank top, is shown in profile with her eyes closed, practicing yoga. The image is overlaid with a teal-to-green gradient.

BWVY

A woman in a patterned top and dark leggings is shown in profile with her hands in a prayer position, practicing yoga. The image is overlaid with a purple-to-blue gradient.

AT
THE
HEART
OF YOGA

A woman in a dark top is shown in profile with her hands in a prayer position, practicing yoga. The image is overlaid with a magenta-to-purple gradient.

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