

YOGA MAGAZINE

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HAPPY NEW YEAR **2026**

SADHVI SARASWATI

**HOLLYWOOD TO
THE HIMALAYAS**

YOGIC ROOTS

of **TKV
DESIKACHAR**

**YOGA BEHIND
BARS**

MEDIC TO
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SAKEEM MAT

**FROM STUDIO
TO SCIENCE**

WITH ROLA



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CONTENTS

ON THE COVER



On the cover

Sadhvi Bagawati Saraswati

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FEATURES

- 08** **HOLLYWOOD TO THE HIMALAYAS: A JOURNEY OF YOGIC AWAKENING**
From Hollywood to the Himalayas, Sadhvi Saraswati discovers yoga as union, surrender, and freedom—transforming trauma into conscious service.

- 64** **THE MIDDLE WAY OF MODERN MANHOOD**
Thirteen Pines' Foundations programme guides men through nine weeks of brotherhood, self-awareness, and embodied masculine integrity in modern life.

- 82** **WINTER HERBS FOR WARMTH AND VITALITY: HONOURING THE STILL SEASON**
Winter herbs restore warmth, vitality, and connection to nature; teas and tonics nourish circulation, immunity, digestion, skin, and mental clarity.

- 34** **FROM RECOVERY TO RENEWAL: HOW YOGA HELPED LOUISE SEALY REBUILD HER LIFE**
Louise Sealy regained mobility, confidence, and purpose through yoga, TSYP guidance, and community service, transforming her life after a severe accident.



50

- 76** **FROM CLOUDS TO CALM: HOW ONE WOMAN SWAPPED LONG-HAUL SKIES FOR YOGA ROOTS IN BAKEWELL**
After decades in aviation, Marie Kirkwood returns home to open Bakewell's first yoga studio, offering calm, connection and renewal.

PHILOSOPHY

- 14** **THOUGHT IS NOT TRUTH: HOW TO STOP LISTENING TO YOUR INNER CRITIC AND START THE NEW YEAR LIGHT**
Karamehmet teaches releasing the inner critic through breathwork, meditation, journaling, and rituals, inviting clarity, freedom, and mindful beginnings.

- 44** **CONFLUENCE OF RIVERS: MAHĀ KUMBHAḤ MĒLĀ "MEETING OF DIVINITY AND DEVOTION"**
A pilgrim's first-hand journey into the Mahā Kumbhaḥ Mēlā, where devotion, ritual and humanity converge in sacred rivers and silence.

PRACTICE

- 58** **SHEKEM MAAT: AWAKENING THE DIVINE FEMININE**
Shekem Maat restores balance, harmony, and divine feminine energy through Kemeti healing, yoga, and somatic practices for personal and collective transformation.

- 18** **FROM STUDIO TO SCIENCE WITH ROLA: THE SCIENCE BEHIND MINDFUL YOGA**
Mindful yoga shapes the brain, body, and wellbeing; research shows benefits for stress, emotion, resilience, and mental health in daily life.

- 88** **ECO-ANXIETY: HOW TAKING PART IN VEGANUARY HELPED FOUR WOMEN FIND PEACE**
Four women share how taking part in Veganuary helped ease eco-anxiety through personal action, community support and renewed hope.



40

INTERVIEW

38 FROM MEDIC TO MYSTIC:
A JOURNEY BEYOND THE
EDGES OF SCIENCE

Lancet-published doctor Anona Blackwell reflects on medicine, mysticism and extraordinary experiences that challenge conventional ideas of consciousness and healing.

BWY SPECIAL

22 FINDING SPACE BEHIND
BARS

Yoga in prison offers young people moments of calm, connection and self-awareness, transforming lives in an environment shaped by trauma and vigilance.

SERIES

28 A NAME, A DREAM, A
DESTINY: THE EARLY ROOTS
OF TKV DESIKACHAR AND
HIS YOGA (PART 1)

Desikachar's early life shaped by sacred vision, meaningful naming, and immersive family tradition, preparing him for a lifetime of Yoga and service.

54 ARIEL'S ADVENTURES IN THE
CHINE: THE GIRL IN BLUE
AND THE SPIRITS OF THE BAY
(CHAPTER 1)

A quiet girl arrives by moonlit sea, discovering an ancient inn, whispered paths and a hidden world awakened by listening.

70 THE KUNDALINI: MEMOIRS
OF A YOGI (CHAPTER 37)

Muni and Snowie gather sacred Himalayan leaves, learning from plants, birds and spirits that healing arises through deep interconnected listening.

READER'S ASHRAM

50 ASK YOGI MAHARAJ DR
MALIK

98 VEDIC ASTROLOGY

WHAT'S HOT

92 NEW BOOKS,
ACCESSORIES AND
PRODUCTS



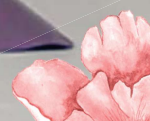
64



08



38



FINDING SPACE BEHIND BARS

*How yoga is transforming
lives in prison*

Author: Emma Nicholson, BWY Teacher

Photos: Andy Aitchison

“This is crazy, I never thought I’d be doing yoga in prison!” That’s a phrase I often hear while teaching yoga in a Young Offender Institution (YOI). For many of the young people I work with, finding themselves serving a custodial sentence is one thing, but finding themselves on a yoga mat, moving, breathing and learning to soften is quite another.

Yoga is rarely something they’ve tried before or ever imagined themselves doing. Most know it only from glimpses in the video game, *Grand Theft Auto*, or on social media. One of the biggest barriers young people face – both in prison and beyond – is the misconception that yoga is an exclusive pursuit reserved for thin, wealthy, lycra-clad women who can bend themselves into impossible shapes.

Breaking down this stereotype and opening yoga to everyone is what drives me. That’s why receiving the Heart of Yoga Community Champion award from the British Wheel of Yoga (BWY) meant so much – it recognised the work of making yoga accessible to people who are under-represented in mainstream yoga.

I’ve practised yoga in some form for most of my adult life. Like so many

practitioners and teachers, I’ve felt the practice lift and support me through life’s highs and lows. That personal experience motivates me to share yoga in environments that can be intensely challenging for the people who live and work there.

Yoga truly makes a difference in prison. It’s an environment marked by hypervigilance, so even a brief opportunity to feel a little ‘less wired’ can be a meaningful part of someone’s week. One young person in my class used that exact phrase, less wired, to describe how yoga made him feel. Others shared that ‘yoga makes things feel more real, in a good way,’ ‘I feel calmer,’ ‘it helps my back,’ ‘it’s so chill,’ or ‘I’m really into the meditation bit.’ Some couldn’t quite explain it but said, ‘I just feel better after yoga.’ Others commented that ‘it’s time out,’ ‘funny how we seem to get on in yoga,’ and ‘it’s the only time I get tired.’

These personal reflections echo research showing that yoga and meditation in prisons bring a wide range of benefits — physical, mental, and social. **The Prison Phoenix Trust (PPT)** reports increasing evidence that yoga and meditation help people in prison reduce impulsiveness, feel less angry, sleep better, and rely less on

drugs. Participants often become more open to education and enrichment activities, develop discipline and focus, feel less isolated and rediscover a sense of self-worth. Their research also shows that when prison staff take part in yoga, they manage stress more effectively, become more tolerant, stay sharper on the wings, and return to their demanding work feeling calmer and more refreshed.

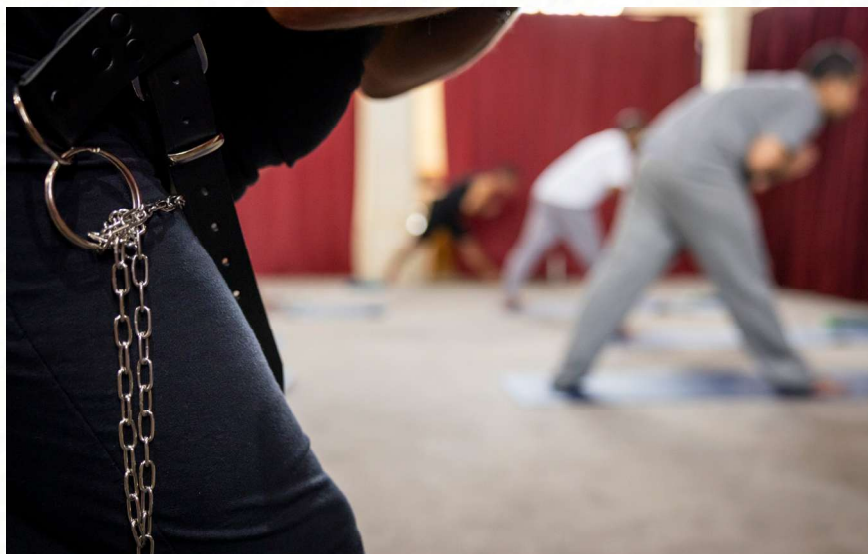
Yoga in prison really matters and can make a powerful difference, though it is not without its challenges. One of the biggest is maintaining class numbers. The transient nature of the prison population means established groups quickly change, so constant outreach and recruitment are essential. Each time new people join, the group dynamic shifts and needs attention to keep everyone engaged and supported. Nurturing that dynamic takes a lot of effort — but the reward is well worth it.

If you’re thinking about teaching yoga in prisons, here are my top five tips for starting your journey.

1) Seek specialist training for teaching yoga in prison

The training that I completed with the PPT was essential in developing the skills and knowledge needed to teach yoga safely and effectively in a secure setting. It offered in-depth learning about what a trauma-informed yoga class looks like and feels like, and how to integrate this approach into your own teaching. The course also provided practical insight into the realities of teaching yoga in a prison environment – from navigating the challenges of space, time, staffing and logistics, to understanding appropriate etiquette.

Specialist training also helps teachers recognise and respond to the different needs of groups such as women, men,





young people and children, as well as those with neurodivergent conditions, mental health challenges, disabilities, or who belong to the vulnerable prisoner population. In addition, it equips you with the skills to respond safely to situations more likely to occur in a prison than in a community class – such as conflict, bullying, grooming or the discovery of weapons.

3) Take the time to learn about shame

Shame plays a powerful role in how people behave and relate to one another, and at its healthiest, it helps humans live together with care and accountability. Shame is also one of the main emotional responses to trauma, and trauma is widespread in the prison population, with many people having

histories of abuse, instability and social disadvantage. **The Prison Reform Trust's Bromley Briefings** highlight how many adults have been in care, experienced homelessness, attempted suicide or lived through abuse as children, underlining just how much unresolved trauma and shame many people carry into custody.

When shame becomes chronic, a person can begin to organise their whole life around avoiding feeling any more of it, which may present as withdrawal, addiction, aggression to others, or harm towards oneself (Nathanson's model: Compass of Shame 1992). Learning about shame has strengthened my skills as a yoga teacher by increasing awareness of potential shame triggers in teaching, offering ways to reduce them, and

supporting a more sensitive response when shame shows up in others. Looking through a lens of shame awareness also deepens self-study, helping teachers notice their own shame responses and triggers, which in turn supports stronger relational skills and a more nuanced understanding of group dynamics.

2) Embrace the richness in simplicity

When I first started teaching yoga, I did what many teachers do: I planned complex sequences in my head (and wrote them on my arm!). Before long, I realised this approach didn't serve the group or me. What truly made a difference was staying present and responsive in the moment, rather than clinging to a rigid plan.

Teaching in a secure setting has shown how powerful yoga can be when kept simple. You may not have the luxury of a yoga studio ambience with ample props and amenities to hand. Your group may not be wearing clothing that allows a full range of movement, and they may not want to take off their socks or shoes. But you do have yoga, and even in this stripped-back environment, the practice can stand strong and shine. There is room for yoga in its fullness, drawing on the philosophy of Patanjali's eight limbs, and giving people a rich, meaningful experience without anything elaborate.





4) Be consistent and look after yourself

Consistency matters deeply and sits at the heart of a trauma-informed approach. Your teaching style, energy, class content, clothing, and even how you move around the room, all create a sense of predictability and safety, so it helps reflect carefully on how you show up.

Leaning on your own personal practice supports this consistency and helps you care for yourself. Holding space in secure settings is not easy, and it becomes significantly harder if you feel physically, mentally or spiritually depleted.

5) Be ready to adapt

You will need to handle change. Your usual space might suddenly be unavailable, the noise levels may spike, your hour-long slot might shrink to 20 minutes, the room could be uncomfortably hot or cold, an alarm may interrupt the session, something unexpected might arrive, a leak might appear in the room, or 80s pop might start blasting through the speakers of the entire unit.

Being able to adapt and go with the flow will serve you well as a prison yoga teacher because you never really know what the day will bring. Keeping an open mind allows you to hold the thread of the practice, even when everything around it feels unpredictable.

Teaching yoga in prison asks for specialist skills, self-awareness and a willingness to work with complexity, but it also offers something rare: the chance to hold a space where people can explore strength, softness and humanity in a place that so often feels stripped of these things. For anyone drawn to this work, the invitation is simple – bring your practice, your curiosity and your compassion, and let yoga do what it does best: meet people exactly where they are.



Emma Nicholson has been practising yoga for more than 25 years and completed her teacher training in 2014. After eight years of teaching community classes, she went on to train with the Prison Phoenix Trust (PPT) and the British Wheel of Yoga (BWY). Since then, she has shared yoga with young people at a Young Offenders Institution.

Interested in teaching yoga in prisons?

The Prison Phoenix Trust offers BWY-accredited courses. If you are a yoga teacher wanting to specialise in bringing yoga into prisons, please contact: all@theppt.org.uk. With around 100 BWY-accredited teachers, the PPT supports regular classes in over 60 prisons, young offender institutions, secure hospitals and approved premises across the UK and Ireland. The Trust's latest **impact report** highlights the impact of their work in prisons.

Ready to begin your yoga teacher training journey? BWY offers inspiring foundation courses to deepen your personal practice, plus our professionally recognised Level 4 courses – equivalent to a university foundation degree – that equip you to teach with confidence and credibility. Join hundreds of dedicated teachers who've built thriving careers through BWY. Explore our full range of trainings and take your next step here: <https://portal.bwy.org.uk/user/trainings>

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