

## Summary to The Prison Phoenix Trust Research Report:

### YOGA TEACHING IN HMP EASTWOOD PARK

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#### AIMS:

*To record prisoners' experiences of prison yoga, personally and in the wider prison context.*

*To record how yoga is perceived by prison staff to affect prisoners.*

*To investigate the prison implications of yoga, administratively, financially and culturally.*

*To provide data on necessary conditions and resources for prison yoga for prison governors.*

Introduction: There is sufficient evidence to suggest that yoga is of value to prisoners, that it helps them both to cope with the general stress of prison life – which may make them easier for staff to deal with them – as well as enabling them to get greater benefit from educational and rehabilitative activities. Yoga is a valuable activity whose potential is underused in prison. (P.4) Their (Prison Phoenix Trust) yoga teachers – if Sally Buxton is in any way typical – together with the testimonies of prisoners who have experienced and benefited from it, are a fine advertisement for this work. Some senior staff in the Prison Service seem to have been won over to it because experience – regardless of the absence of research – has told them it has value. (P.4) Once the yoga class was established with a rolling membership due to the high turnover of remand inmates, feedback was good. There was always a waiting list and Sally's reputation grew as a good teacher. (P.7)

1. Governor: The feedback from the people who do it (yoga) is very positive. Yoga is pleasingly problem free. You wouldn't know it was going on most times. (P.6/7) It opens the door to start working on other issues, which may be education associated. (P.9) The way the yoga teacher contributes is through the Heads of the Education Department and drug workers. They do see the benefits with the yoga in their different areas, they advocate its use...for the whole of the prison. (P.32)
2. Deputy Governor and Education Officer: Yoga is a physical and psychological benefit and it crucially enables women to gain more benefit from other educational activities. It is a vehicle for them to increase the amount of studying they do. If they can get into yoga, they can open themselves up to so much more. (P.8)
3. Education Officer: In the absence of a formal anger management course, the yoga teaching could be regarded as a substitute for it. Not only did the inmates benefit but the prison staff too, because if women are more relaxed as a result of yoga, they are better able to deal with anger problems.(P.8) Women are able to sort things in their head more easily, since they had learned the techniques for breathing, for relaxation. A lot of girls said that since they have been doing yoga their medication has lessened. That's very important as it's a huge cost. (P.10/11)
4. Drugs Co-ordinator: The women that were doing it for six weeks or more were actually feeling quite good about themselves and I thought, my lot could do with some of that. The gentleness of yoga is especially beneficial to emotionally vulnerable women with serious self esteem problems. Yoga is uninvasive. I don't feel there is any pressure from yoga – you do it to the best of your ability and nothing more. The women felt better and were enjoying having some space. With yoga they could just focus on themselves and they liked that. Inmates can be inspired to take up yoga on the outside and this increases their opportunities for reintegration... (P.15/16)

5. Prison Officer: The yoga teacher has actually spent time with this small group of people which you don't usually get in here. It is a major thing actually the attention of someone in authority – big to some inmates. Yoga helps get benefit from other activities and contributes to a better atmosphere in the prison. (P.24)

Prisoner 1: Just a few bends and stretches, I couldn't believe it. It makes every bit of me move and I think it's really good. (P.34)

Prisoner 2: People do use their own cells to do yoga, not necessarily on a regular basis, but when feeling particularly stressed. One girl had a letter from home, she was stressing out, really angry and she said: I am going to my room to do my yoga and she calmed herself down. (P.43)

Prisoner 3: ( She found it helped her sleep problems.) (P.44)

Prisoner 4: It's calming, releases loads of tensions from my body, easier to sleep at night, stops you doing irrational thinking, not uptight and snapping at people. (P.46)

Prisoner 5: If your body is able to relax and let go, a lot of that anger ...and your stress can be let out. People that are highly stressed are ready to explode. I suffer from depression and have been able to go off tablets. I find myself during the week starting to get depressed and as soon as I get to exercise, yoga or the gym, I feel much better. (P.47)

Prisoner 6: The pregnancy would have been harder to cope with had it not been for the yoga classes. It helped with back pain but mostly the effect was psychological. I'm focussed now, I can sort my head out. I'm not so stressed and the baby is not so stressed. For me to be focussed on myself and my insides is a spiritual thing in itself. (P.47/48)

Prisoner 7: I actually fell asleep at the end because it was that relaxing. But when I left the session I felt completely new. I felt refreshed. I felt like I'd just been in a swimming pool and out of it. My behaviour has got a lot better. (P.49)

Prisoner 8: If you're calmer in yourself, you can go into your classes and concentrate and not fartass around. Yoga gets your mind in perspective and you think, right, I feel good about myself, so I will try this. (P.49)

Conditions and Resources: Money is first concern. Funding was found out of the Education budget. (P.8) Second concern is infrastructure – the Education Department provided that (P.6) and the room. Third concern was to contain yoga within reasonable limits and from a management viewpoint, yoga was problem-free.(P.7)

Conclusion: It seems to me beyond argument that yoga teaching is valued by the prisoners to whom I spoke. The breadth and consistency of comments suggests their (prisoners') appreciation is genuine. They value it for the right reasons – it helps them to cope with a difficult environment and to become psychologically healthier individuals. (P.59). Some prisoners see the good that yoga does for friends and make up their minds to join in on that basis. (P.45) The motivation for yoga for the vast majority is to learn to relax. Prisoner testimonies suggest that there may well be scope for the provision of more than one yoga class, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the time has come for some prison somewhere to be bold, and create a part time – or even a full-time - yoga teacher post. (P.60). One might reasonably infer from this research – and the way that it corroborates other information which The Prison Phoenix Trust has collated – that the work of the Trust is sufficiently important in the contribution it makes to the wellbeing of prisoners and the smooth running of prisons to warrant core funding from the Prison Service. (P.62)