



The power of yoga

The Prison Phoenix Trust. *By Sandy Chubb*

FLICK THROUGH ANY glossy magazine and you are bound to find a celebrity or 2 in their yoga gear striking a pose. Yoga's not just for the stars, you too can get with Jennifer, J-Lo and the A list crew.

The Prison Phoenix Trust, is a charity which supports prisoners in their spiritual lives through the disciplines of meditation, yoga, silence and the breath. Yoga encourages you to treat your body with kindness; through regular practise of yoga and breathing exercises, you can start to feel better.

Many long time drug users discover how merciful the body is once they decide to choose good health. A frequently-expressed fear: "I've messed up my head for good" can dissolve when you start to glimpse for yourself some of the potential we carry in our bodies, minds and spirits.

The Prison Phoenix Trust (PPT) was founded in 1988 and it supports those of you serving a prison sentence to see it as an opportunity, unlikely as it may sound, and a place of retreat and possibility.

Just like nuns and monks, women and men in custody are encouraged to use their cells to deepen their spirituality and adopt a practice which can help them drop conditioning which may have clung to them for years.

At the time of writing, the PPT is supporting teachers offering 144 yoga and meditation classes in 78 prisons (27 of them are for prison officers and staff). Seven prisons run classes for women – in Brockhill, Cookham Wood, Eastwood Park, Foston Hall, Holloway, Peterborough and Styal. There are 18 women's classes in these prisons, which take place on education, drug free, remand and health care wings (only one of the 18 classes is for prison staff).

Setting up yoga and meditation classes in women's prisons isn't easy. It is curious to know why such a safe, therapeutic and beneficial practice is not more widely available. Three years ago, Dr Mike Nellis, of the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at Birmingham University, carried out six months' research into the benefits of yoga teaching in HMP Eastwood Park. His aims included recording women inmates' experiences of prison yoga, personally and in the wider prison context.

He also wanted to record how yoga is perceived by prison staff to affect prisoners, and investigate the prison implications of yoga administratively, financially and culturally.

His report conclusion read: "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 appreciation is genuine. They value it for the right reasons – it helps them cope with a

difficult environment and to become psychologically healthier individuals. Some prisoners see the good that yoga does for friends and make up their minds to join in on that basis. 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 course for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the time has come for some prisons somewhere to be bold and create a part-time – or even full-time, yoga teacher post."

The main part of the work of the Prison Phoenix Trust is to encourage inmates to practice regularly in their cells and we send out free resource books and a CD to help them. We also have a team of specially-trained letter-writers who answer a continual stream of prisoners' letters, all needing help in, as they say, getting their heads together.

Danielle wrote from HMP Buckley Hall: "Yoga helped me tremendously in rehab. I do about 20 minutes yoga in the morning rather than have coffee and a fag. Once I get into it, I don't feel so anxious or nervous. Although meditation sometime intimidates me, this morning it was nice and helped me feel a lot less scatty. The letter and books have really come at just the right time. I was stuck, trying to find a way to get out of the pit. But now I see a light up there and a ladder for me to climb out. I've always known there was more. Really it is what I've been searching for since I was 5 or 6 years old. Now it is like my inner child is speaking to me."

So what are you waiting for? If you want to learn more about the free resource books and CDs we offer, or you are a member of staff and want a free workshop, please write to:

The Prison Phoenix Trust
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