

Column The

by Sarah Mackintosh



Sarah Mackintosh is a Diploma Tutor for the British Wheel of Yoga. If you would like to ask any questions on the subject of Yoga teaching or would like to make any comments, please do write in to PO Box 16969, London E1W 6FY and Sarah will be happy to reply. Sarah will be responding to readers' questions as quickly as possible within this series.

If you would like more information on the Prison Phoenix Trust and their work in prisons, you may contact: PO Box 328, Oxford OX2 7HF or visit www.prisonphoenixtrust.org.uk.

yoga in prison

This piece is unequivocally addressed to teachers - apologies for once to student and general readers. I have never taught in a prison, though I have done the *Prison Phoenix Trust* course for Yoga teachers and maintain an interest in the Trust's activities. I have not worked in prisons simply because at present I can't, but it remains an idea which sits at the back of my mind waiting to be put into action.

Some of my diploma students have thought, one when still in her twenties, and their reports reinforce my feeling that along with mental health, incarceration is the vanishing pool of teaching. The prison population in this country is, we are told, higher than ever and there was a recent report on Radio 4 about the state of Holloway, my 'local', as it were, which horrified me. We know that women in particular are overwhelmingly in prison for debt-related 'offences'. I put the word in quotation marks deliberately. I do question whether it is not the structure of a capitalist society, where increasingly you need education to function adequately, which causes the troubles experienced by these women. Many of them are the products of areas in which school attendance is very poor and what many of us would look upon as an ordinary life made impossible by the behaviour of others. I am certain that these areas are limited and local in nature, but I am equally certain that their residents are over-represented in prison.

You will have guessed what is coming - a plea for you to consider prison work. So-called 'young offenders' in particular need us desperately, as do the lifers. Read any edition of the *Prison Phoenix Trust* newsletter and that becomes self-evident. These are ordinary people who have embarked on ways of living which trespass on the rights and freedoms of the rest of us it is true, but who have paid desperately in terms of boredom, loneliness and fear for what they have done.

Watching my son growing up in a then ordinary though now extremely prosperous area of North London made me realise how easy it is for young men to decide that alternative ways of living are attractive. I remember saying at the time that I could easily imagine him turning into a tearaway. It used to shock people, but it was true. 'How could you say that of your own son?' they would say. 'Observation' I would reply. He left the school in question eight years ago, (and it was an ordinary, well-meaning comprehensive) but even then there was the beginning of the culture of carrying knives which has now become normal. My son, who has a well-developed sense of self-preservation, and though powerfully built is not aggressive, chose to avoid trouble and not to join in, but he could easily have chosen the glamour of that other route. He did do things which might have turned my hair greyer than it already is had I known about them, so he was an ordinary male teenager in that respect, but he had the good sense to avoid serious violence. And I do not believe that it is just my influence which was his touchstone. I had to learn that in the school playground there are some people who only understand force and that for simple self-protection he had on occasion to use it.

The point of all this is the fine line I see between so-called socially acceptable ways of growing up in the young and its opposite. Those of us who have the good fortune to grow up law-abiding have, I think, no cause for smugness. I think we are in large measure lucky, not virtuous. The accidents of genetics, of place, time, geography and gender are our guardians. Admittedly we have our parents to thank for if they brought us up well, but even so ...

That being the case, I think we owe it to ourselves to give something back to society. I have a theory that all work involves a mixture of bread and butter and jam. Those of us Yoga teachers who work outside adult education or the NHS have a working life which is almost entirely jam - wonderful job satisfaction and relatively little in the way of paperwork to deal with. This is of course the opposite of many people's working experience. Given this jamminess, I think we owe it to ourselves to include some of the bread and butter, the unglamorous work which gives something back to the wider community. I can think of no more deserving recipients than the inhabitants of Her Majesty's prisons.

yoga for

By Roland

"You who want peace,
can only find it by
complete forgiveness",
'A Course in Miracles'.

This is the first of a regular column from The Prison Phoenix Trust which encourages prisoners in their spiritual lives through the practices of meditation and Yoga, working with silence and the breath. Today the PPT is supporting teachers who deliver 121 Yoga and meditation classes in prisons all over the UK and Eire. Twenty one of these classes are for prison officers and staff. Altogether there are 83 prison Yoga teachers sharing their practice with people currently behind bars.

The PPT offers personal support to prisoners (and prison staff) through correspondence, prison classes and workshops and it sends out resource books and newsletters. The PPT also train and support well qualified Yoga teachers for this challenging and rewarding work.

So many prisoners are confined to tiny, often crowded cells, but they are determined to find ways of practising in the small space they have available. The following is a short sequence designed to cater for these special needs.