Oxford University has recently conducted research into how yoga and meditation affect prisoners. The findings are that:

Prisoners who do yoga and meditation have:

- Reduced stress
- Reduced psychological distress
- Improved mood
- Improved concentration
- Improved decision making
- Improved ability to override impulse

This means that prisons with yoga and meditation classes are likely to have:

- Regimes better able to look after prisoners with humanity
- Improved staff/inmate relationships

**Background**

Since 1988, when the Prison Phoenix Trust (PPT) began offering yoga and meditation in UK prisons, significant anecdotal evidence has amassed through letters and conversations with prisoners of the positive impact that yoga and meditation have on their lives. To understand the effects of the PPT’s work more clearly, we conducted rigorous quantitative research in 2012. This project was approved by a national NHS ethics board, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), and was financially supported through an award from the BIAL Foundation.

While there is research clarifying the benefits of yoga and meditation in the general population, little has been carried out with prisoners practising these disciplines and none, until recently, into the benefits of yoga and meditation as the PPT offers them in prison.

For this research, prisoners were recruited in seven West Midlands prisons.¹ Prisoners were randomly assigned to one of two groups: the ‘yoga’ group, who were asked to complete a ten-week course of yoga (one class each week run by a PPT teacher) or the ‘no-yoga’ group, who were asked not to do any yoga or meditation but completed the questionnaires and

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¹ HMP / YOI Drake Hall, HMPs Dovegate, Featherstone, Hewell, Stafford and Shrewsbury, HMYOI Swinfen Hall
computer tasks at the start and end of the ten weeks. We compared data from the two
groups to see what difference the practice makes to their lives, and to their ability to
complete tasks requiring concentration and attention.

Findings

“Meditation practice is working for me. It helps me to be calm, relaxed and not get angry
and irritated. It helps me not react to people in a bad way and to take people’s opinion on
board. Recently, when someone went a bit too far, instead of reacting to it I just walked
away.”

Dave, HMP Wymott

103 prisoners completed the study. While we worked in one women’s prison and one young
offenders institution, most participants were adult and male. The age ranged from 18 to 68
years old, providing a good representation of the UK prison population. We collected two
kinds of data, described below.

Questionnaires
The first kind of data came from one-on-one interviews with researchers. Interviews
happened at the beginning of the study and at the end.

We asked prisoners about their mood, stress levels, psychological distress, and social
behaviour. Prisoners reported many positive changes after completing the yoga and
meditation class. Figure 1 shows that mood improved for those prisoners who did yoga and
meditation, whilst the prisoners who didn’t complete the yoga/meditation course showed a
slight decrease in their scores of positive mood.

![Figure 1: The effects of yoga and meditation on positive mood.](image)

The yoga group also showed significant reductions in the amount of stress and psychological
distress they reported feeling, even when compared to the no-yoga group, who also showed
slight decreases in stress and psychological distress.
“Stress” is a measure of how stressful situations in one’s life are perceived to be. This includes perceptions of how uncontrollable, overloaded and unpredictable people find their lives. “Psychological distress” is measured using questions about depression, anxiety, and problematic interpersonal feelings, so it provides a measure of general psychological wellbeing.

**Go/NoGo Task**

We collected a second kind of data, using a computer task, which allowed us to measure speed of response and concentration. Prisoners completed a simple computer game, where they needed to concentrate and respond – or not respond – to images on the screen.

In the version of the Go/NoGo task that we used, prisoners watched a series of ‘X’s and ‘O’s flash, one at a time, on the screen. Every time they saw an ‘X’ they had to press a button on the keyboard as quickly as possible (this is a ‘Go’ trial). However, if they saw an ‘O’ appear on the screen, they had to withhold this response and NOT press any button (this is a ‘NoGo’ trial). Most of the time an ‘X’ appears, so, you must be careful not to press the button automatically when the ‘O’ appears, and this can be difficult.

Prisoners who completed the yoga and meditation course were better at playing the game than those prisoners who did not do the yoga/meditation course.
What do the results mean for prisons?

Our results suggest that in those prisons where yoga and meditation is being offered to prisoners, it is helping Her Majesty’s Prison Service (and prison services in other countries) fulfil the three purposes as set out in the HMPS Statement of Purpose:

1. Look after prisoners with humanity.
2. Help people lead law-abiding lives in custody.
3. Help people lead law-abiding lives after release from prison.

Since yoga and meditation were associated with an improvement in performance on the ‘NoGo’ part of the computer task, we can argue that practising yoga/meditation helps prisoners inhibit unhelpful responses and reduces impulsivity. Yoga and meditation aided performance on both the ‘Go’ and the ‘NoGo’ trials, suggesting that the taught classes helped prisoners pay attention more generally, or try harder, or both. We can argue further that this improvement in executive control supports HMPS’ second and third purposes and that offenders practising yoga and meditation -- and experiencing the consequential improved ability to override impulse and enhanced focus, attention and effective decision making -- are more likely to enjoy, stick with and succeed at education, employment and offending behaviour programmes, both in the prison and upon release.

Prisoners who completed the yoga and meditation class clearly felt it had a measurable benefit to them. Yoga and meditation appeared to increase the extent to which they experienced positive emotions, and reduced stress and psychological distress. Because of this, yoga classes and the participants’ consequential increased positive mood and decreased stress and psychological distress, represent a purposeful activity that treats prisoners with humanity, fulfilling HMPS’ first purpose.

Also of significance is the potential cost savings as a result of reduced violence. Prisoners who are in a better mood and have reduced stress and psychological distress are less likely to engage in violent behaviour, which means enhanced safety, less paperwork, less staff time for adjudications, and fewer staff sick days. Reducing distress is another important likely outcome. Improved staff-prisoner relationships is another.

The research shows clearly that yoga and meditation help address the Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviour pathway of reducing re-offending identified by NOMS. These benefits can be attained from just a regular weekly yoga lesson. The cost of a yoga class in prison is around £50 per week.

The findings of this project give us reason to believe that yoga and meditation are important tools for prisoners, as is frequently seen in their correspondence. Mike from HMP Wayland for example said earlier this year,

“While detoxing and afterwards, I found yoga works better than any medication the doctor could give us. I am used to being in a really negative frame of mind: lying, stealing and being deceitful. Now, I’m always either positive or neutral, but mostly positive. Not a lot can get me down. I’m finding it easier to tolerate people who would normally make me angry.”