



their meditation rather more abruptly than I had meant to! That moment was simply another treasure within the gift of the day.

Prisoner classes may not be established for a while yet: the men's routine is currently full, and yoga may have to wait until the early spring to be timetabled. My heart has been in this from the beginning. I am prepared to wait.

I pause here by the pond after another good staff session, surrounded by this gold and blue autumn day, waiting for my heady joys to recede, and my urgency for the future to arrive. Wait for all this to dissolve into determination and clarity. Then, driving home becomes a safer prospect! Om Shanti.

## A Parallel World in Palma Prison

By Rita Norris

**I** am always humbled to see how receptive the prisoners are to yoga and meditation. I know it has changed lives. Men who might never have tried a yoga class find it helps them. When I started we had a motley collection of red cross mats and cushions. One day ten new mats and ten blocks were donated anonymously. Sometime later the Red Cross told me it was from a prisoner student who donated them in gratitude when he was released.



I have lived in Mallorca for 34 years and have been teaching yoga and meditation in Palma prison for eight. It began in 1998 when I attended a PPT training course led by Sandy Chubb. I then taught for several years in a drug rehab centre. Many years later a yoga teacher friend asked if I was interested in teaching in Palma prison. 'Yes, yes!' I said.

Spanish prisons do not consider yoga to be educational so there is no budget, and since one has to be affiliated to an organization I became a volunteer for the Cruz Roja (Red Cross). My handbag, mobile phone, etc. are secured in a private locker. To enter, I show my photo ID and am given my Red Cross badge. The only items I take in are a yoga mat, block and small cymbals. I pass through a scanner and nine more locked doors. The doors open as if by magic as soon as I am in front of them. Open sesame!

It's like entering a parallel world: high walls topped with barbed wire and the cell block buildings. Strangely, every time I go inside I get a feeling of gratitude and privilege of seeing this view. There is a beautiful rose garden and fruit trees, all tended by prisoners. There are people wheeling trolleys, taking food and supplies from one cell block to another. All in all a feeling of peace, strange in a prison but maybe because it is Friday afternoon with not much going on. I have been told some of the cell blocks are not so peaceful.

When I started, classes were held in a small room in the social cultural centre. When we outgrew this it was moved to the gym in the medical centre. Some officers were, understandably, not very happy with this as it coincided with other prisoners suffering from different medical conditions using it, but there were never any problems. Now we are in a large warehouse type building

which has several large rooms where other courses are held.

Inmates are offered several different courses, including university degrees, carpentry, plumbing, Spanish for foreigners, English lessons, gardening, theatre, art and of course yoga and meditation. Prisoners make a request to join a course and are referred by their psychologist before being accepted. I have been told there are long waiting lists. Attendance on any course is recorded and contributes towards allowances for visits and days spent outside.

There are approximately 1300 men and 100 women in Palma prison. When I arrive my students are called from their various cell blocks. In my class, if all come, there are 14 men and two women ranging from mid 20s to mid 50s. It takes a long time for them to arrive so although we are supposed to have 90 minutes, it is usually never more than an hour.

I have no 'panic button' but I believe there is a camera somewhere. I have never felt worried. One rather amusing incident was when we were practising simhasana, the lion posture. As you know there is a lot of tension in prisons so the release of tension with the roar on the out breath from 16 inmates was very loud! Within seconds three prison officers came running into the room by which time there was a silence in which you could hear a pin drop. I thanked the officers sincerely but assured them that everything was fine.

Seeing my prisoner students lying relaxed in savasana or engaged in meditation continues to be one of the most satisfying and fulfilling moments of my week. I'm humbled to be able to teach in Palma prison.

## Moving On



By Sally



**I**t is great to see our prisoner yoga students progress in their yoga and meditation practice. And if you are like me, you will wonder how you can best help them continue their practice when they are released so they can continue to benefit as they cope with life's many challenges.

In prison we have the luxury of being able to respond to people just as we find them. We do not need to know anything about their past or the reasons they are in prison. All we need to do is to trust the practice and then get out of the way. We teach in institutions geared to protecting both prisoners and staff as long as we follow the rules.

In our desire to help them as they near release, we may be tempted to start looking for a suitable class for them. We may consider introducing the student to a yoga teacher we know, or even encourage them to consider teacher training.

Let's stand back for a moment and think how we can best help and support them make this transition back into the community. Remember, we know nothing about the person's background, why they are in prison, or the risk they may present to the public or to specific groups of people such as women or children.

Most people face huge personal challenges when they leave prison. Maybe they need to find stable accommodation, or secure an income to support themselves. Some struggle to remain drug or alcohol free. The most important thing we can do to help our prisoner students cope with these challenges is to encourage them to start, or maintain, a regular personal practice. The PPT will support them as they do this by exchanging letters with them if they wish, and sending yoga books and the quarterly newsletter. This support and encouragement is open to all people

when they leave prison.

When the time is right, they may like to attend a local yoga class. You can tell them about the different types of yoga classes there are outside. And talk with them to help them think about what they are looking for in a class and how to find a suitable teacher. You can suggest where to look for classes such as on yoga organisation websites or in café or shop windows.

You can ask them: do they want a class that is more meditative? Something strongly physical? With lots of philosophy? Let them know that there are many styles and approaches of yoga classes out there, some of which will be different than what they've experienced in prison. They may not realise that once they are out and looking for a class, they can phone teachers to ask if they can pay for just one class, to try it out before committing.

There are many reasons why it is not advisable to invite an ex-prisoner to come to your class outside or to refer them to another local yoga teacher. If you feel this is something that you want to do, and you feel there are special circumstances that may warrant this, you must talk to your line manager first. For good reasons it is against prison rules for serving members of staff to engage with ex-prisoners after they leave.

We have to have faith in the old saying, 'When the time is right the teacher will appear'. We often hear from our ex-prisoner friends how they discovered their own path. This will be a great source of pride for them. We have to trust that everything happens at the right time and that we have done all we can to make the inspirational practice of yoga and meditation available to them.

## Two Minutes with Gary Ward

*Gary began teaching at Gartree in early 2018 initially in the prison's therapeutic community, and then on the PIPE unit. Gary completed the PPT's 5-day residential training, 'Teaching Yoga in Prison' in 2014.*

### **Tell us about your life outside yoga.**

I have a four year old daughter, who's just started school. We thought it would be a tricky transition but she's enjoying it. I'm also working on Salad Garden, Leicester's only commercial urban garden. We specialise in providing mixed salad bags, micro greens, herbs and edible flowers to shops and restaurants. It's based on bio dynamic principles – basically one step beyond organic, conceived by Rudolph Steiner. (Instagram: the\_salad\_garden)

### **Tell us about yourself as a yoga teacher.**

I continue to teach group classes, though am doing less one-to-one teaching so I concentrate on developing Salad Garden. Currently within my yoga I'm enjoying observing the practice of bio dynamic farming as it relates to yoga. Both practices encourage you to be in the moment and to observe. In the garden I'm observing a plant, a living entity, prana. Through yoga I'm observing emotions, the mind and its movement. Both practices encourage a deeper relationship with nature and for me they create a wholeness.

### **What was your motivation for wanting to teach in prison?**

I came to yoga through my experience of suffering. I'd been using marijuana daily for a number of years, basically suppressing my emotions. It wasn't until I'd found myself in a destructive relationship in Warsaw, Poland that I took a good look at myself, my situation and asked 'what made me happy?' The answer was yoga.

I thought being in prison would be an amazing opportunity for someone to practise yoga. Of course, I was naïve about the issues affecting many prisoners. It's true that prisoners have time, and a reduction of responsibilities – so they can become cell-monks. When I originally had this idea I didn't know about the PPT, then a friend did some research and told me there was already an organisation doing it! I hadn't been teaching for two years at that stage, but eventually the opportunity arose for me to teach in prison.

### **What's the most challenging thing you've overcome?**

I found the therapeutic community quite chaotic, and I felt some relief when the prison ended that particular session. The adolescent immature energy was always present.



I've encountered a lot of sadness. I remember one prisoner telling me how the prison allows him to breed budgies because he's doing a long sentence. His sentence carried a lot of sadness.

### **What's the funniest thing that's happened?**

There is always a laugh in each class, and amusing opening banter. One time we were doing a warrior sequence which is supposed to allow the student to become flexible enough to do box splits. One guy made us all laugh saying, "Well, I'd like to be capable to have some kind of sex life when I leave here."

### **What's the most rewarding thing to happen in class?**

When my class with the therapeutic community class ended two prisoners thanked me. Their sincerity was very moving, and has really stayed with me.

Another prisoner was practising very physically but without paying any attention to his breath. He had an amazing yoga body, but introducing him to the breath literally blew him away. He was on cloud nine!

### **Do you have much interaction with staff?**

Yes, I know quite a lot of them. When I didn't have keys I made an effort to get to know them as they escorted me in. During the PPT training I remembered this was encouraged. We would chat about family, and personal stuff. Officers often join in with my class, and afterwards we talk about ourselves, yoga, and sometimes the prisoners. I think we get on well.

### **Did you have concerns before teaching in prison?**

I was quite naïve before teaching in prison, about the issues affecting prisoners. I've begun to realise just how fragile and vulnerable some of them are. Respecting boundaries, and being careful with them is important.

In my second week on the therapeutic community class, I watched the documentary on the Stephen Lawrence enquiry and it emotionally affected me. Since then I've begun using keys, and as I've fumbled about getting used to them I've realised the dynamic between myself and the prisoners has shifted. I feel like I'm going to be continually learning, and I can't become complacent.



# Nourishing & cool: the PPT meditation weekend



By Brent



**F**ifteen prison yoga teachers and two letter writers attended the meditation weekend in September. The quiet retreat included twelve hours of still, silent sitting, and two hours of slow guided asana. The weather was wet and cool, so sitting inside hearing the soft, natural sound of the rain felt soothing.

This year we were joined by prison yoga teachers from around the UK (and by Rita, from Spain – see page 2), including Caitlin from Kent, Les from Lincolnshire and Maria from Lancashire.

Rosita wrote afterwards: ‘It was such a wonderful space to practise meditation’ and the rainy weather encouraged us to turn our attention inwards. Two teachers showed tremendous humility and sincerity by saying their inspiration to deepen their meditation practice came from seeing and hearing the positive

effects it was having on their prisoner students.

*“Life became clearer over the weekend. By not trying to imagine anything, or make anything special happen.... by just breathing, the noise inside me began to quieten down.”*

The meditation weekend is the PPT training I enjoy the most. It’s a wonderful opportunity for us to come together, and support one another as we practise. Being around letter writers and prison yoga teachers -- even in silence -- is nourishing. During moments of distraction, I found the sound of steady rain dripping through the tall pines kind to the senses and calming.

In 2019 the meditation weekend will be 28<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> June. Whether you’ve come before, or have no experience of a meditation retreat, you would be most welcome. (Get in touch any time to register your interest.)



## Training for Teachers



### **A Day for Prison Yoga Teachers: Recognising and Working with Autism in Your Prison Classes**

*Wytham Village Hall, Oxford, Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> February, 2019 - £10*

We’d scheduled this day for 2018, but the main speaker fell ill. We’re pleased she’s agreed to be with us in 2019.

This day is for yoga and meditation teachers and cover teachers already working in prisons, secure hospitals, IRCs and bail hostels, or those about to begin. The incidence of autism among prisoners is estimated to be higher than the general population. This day will help you identify signs of autism in your students in prison, and to practice those skills you already possess which will help you work effectively with them. Caroline Hearst, an ‘informed insider’ (she was relieved to discover she was autistic as an adult) and founder of Autism Matters, will lead us through an interactive and informative morning.

While the two other aspects of the day aren’t to do with autism, they fit the aim of informing and sharing experience for your teaching. We don’t often have the chance to hear the inner experience of our prisoner students, so we are fortunate that John, a former prisoner, will be talking with us about his life running drugs before prison, his time inside and his life since release. And there will be plenty of time to share challenges and what is working well in your prison classes. We will find time for yoga asana and seated meditation and a bring-and-share lunch and ample breaks provide a chance to talk with others engaged in this unique work. The cost is being kept low to minimise expenses for teachers travelling from a distance.

### **A Day for Prison Yoga Teachers in Scotland and the North of England: Celebrating Prison Yoga and Meditation!**



*Eric Liddell Centre, Edinburgh, Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2019 - £30*

Yoga teachers have been offering yoga and meditation in Scottish prisons for longer than the Prison Phoenix Trust has been established: over 30 years! This day is a chance for teachers currently working in prison - and those interested in finding out more - to discuss the approaches that prisoners have said are most useful in helping them discover a deep sense of freedom and renewal. We’ll look at how we can best use that feedback from prisoners as we teach our prison classes each week, and examine other principles of working with prisons which help successfully embed yoga into a prison’s regime. Finally, we will practise meditation and yoga together and have ample time to hear from each other how our classes in prison are going. This day is for teachers from Scotland, the north of England and further afield.

### **Summer Meditation Retreat for Prison Yoga Teachers and Letter Writers**



*Carmelite Retreat Centre, Boars Hill, Oxford, 21<sup>st</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2019 - £175*

This retreat, held mostly in silence, offers a chance to develop your meditation practice so you feel more confident in offering it as part of your teaching. Talks on the practice as well as one-to-one meetings with the facilitators provide the support you need for the extended periods of practice over the weekend. Meditation retreats are an excellent way to establish a regular practice or to revive or strengthen it, so we welcome teachers who have attended in previous years, as well as those who have not yet been. First priority is given to teachers working in prisons, IRCs, secure hospitals or bail hostels, and to volunteer letter writers. Some financial assistance is available. You may also pay in instalments. We hope you can join us.



**For more information or to book your place on any of these courses, please get in touch with Sally, Brent or Victoria.**



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