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MPhil in Criminological Research

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The Meaning and Effects of Yoga in Prison

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Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text and bibliography.

The dissertation does not exceed the word limit as set out by the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Law. The length of this dissertation is 17,624 words.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

> *I don't know whether I connect to something or whether I find it in myself, but there is certainly an inner well-being [in yoga] that gives you strength and it's a bit like putting on a warm coat on a cold day. It's your protective blanket and it's a heat source inside you. [Carl]*

Prison suicide rates are at a record high (105 self-inflicted deaths in England and Wales)[1] and self-harm is also alarmingly on the rise (Weaver, 2016). These statistics indicate that many prisons are exceptionally barren and emotionally 'cold' environments. In light of this, as Carl states, it may be necessary to provide sources of 'heat' to defend against these deprivations. There may be a timely opportunity for yoga to help transform the painful and destructive prison environment into something life-affirming. Indeed, as Feuerstein claims (1998: 24), yoga is arguably the "most comprehensive tradition of self-transformation in the world".

With rapidly increasing numbers of followers (currently estimated at 30 million), yoga is one of the most popular disciplines in contemporary society (Singleton and Byrne 2008). It has been understood as a tool of human flourishing, and a path to self-understanding and awakening. In light of this, and with over 80 prisons across the UK offering yoga classes, it is important to understand the drivers for its popularity and what role yoga plays in the lives of prisoners.

However, while current research has revealed a number of promising findings, the voices of prisoners have been strangely absent. More specifically, existing studies describe significant positive effects and psychological changes but often in a way that is 'compartmentalized' and divorced from the precise meanings which prisoners attach to these changes. Indeed, little has been said about prisoners' perspectives on the effects of yoga that could help to understand the mechanisms of change. This study specifically attends to this problem by trying to capture the insights and experiences of the participants, which may help us to learn more about how yoga effects prisoners' well-being, behaviour and understanding of themselves.

The next chapter examines the literature on yoga in prison, to add context and situate this research. This review pays particular attention to relevant aspects of the prisoner experience before exploring how yoga relates to broader approaches to rehabilitation in prison. Chapter

[1] Includes suicide as well as accidental deaths as a result of a person's own actions

three briefly discusses the methodological aspects of this study, including the qualitative methods used here, the sampling procedures, and relevant ethical considerations.

Chapters four, five and six make up the substantive findings. The first of these three chapters is about the motivation(s) for beginning yoga, and the direct experiences of practicing it, both within the classroom setting and independently. Chapter five discusses different ways that yoga can facilitate coping in prison: helping alleviate the pains of imprisonment. In particular, it investigates the effects of yoga on prisoners' physical health and emotional well-being, while also examining its impact on prisoners' relationships with others. The final substantive chapter examines how yoga affects prisoners' conceptions of themselves. It explores various themes in some depth, including: spirituality, personal growth and transformation. It takes a closer look at the internal mechanisms through which such changes may occur focusing on agency, emotion regulation and the discovery of meaning and purpose.

Finally, the conclusions from these findings are drawn together in chapter 7, and there is an attempt to reflect on directions for future research, policy and practice.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Coping in Prison: finding a place for Yoga

Much has been written about the fact that prison is characterized by a number of structural and institutional deprivations including: liberty, family life, goods and services, autonomy, security and heterosexual relationships (Sykes 1958; Newton 1994; Crewe, 2007). In addition, the process of 'prisonization' (Clemmer, 1940) attacks prisoners' sense of self-worth and individuality through a ''series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of the self" (Goffman, 1961: 24). Prevailing prisoner codes and hierarchies (Sykes and Messinger, 1960, Crewe, 2009) enforce norms of "hegemonic masculinity" such as the exploitation of weaker men (Jewkes, 2005; Evans and Wallace, 2008). Surviving such inhumane conditions is, for many prisoners, a painful experience that can cause significant long-term psychological damage (Sykes, 1958; Cohen and Taylor, 1972). It is particularly difficult for the high percentage of the prison population who suffer from mental health problems, often as a result of child abuse, parental neglect and social exclusion (Morgan and Liebling, 2007, West and Farrington, 1973, Ministry of Justice 2002). These groups are especially vulnerable in prison, having "[in]sufficient emotional stability, resources or integration of self to thrive, except under nonthreatening conditions." (Liebling, 2012:9).

Conditions conducive to human flourishing are rarely present in prisons, and are only cultivated in certain 'emotional zones' (Crewe et al. 2013) or 'niches' within these environments (Toch, 1992: 237).[2] Survival therefore, may depend on finding intrinsic value, and exploring the so-called "parameters of one's existence" (O'Donnell, 2014: 258). This 'inward turn', is often achieved through exercising small acts of autonomy (Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005) and engaging in a "self-discovery or self-reconstruction" processes, through which prisoners can develop "a deeper understanding of themselves and the behavior that had led them to where they now were" (Crewe et al., forthcoming: 34). Further, given that prisoners often face existential questions, sometimes undergoing a "deep existential crisis" (Liebling, 2014:5), the self-reflection process becomes an integral part of their "struggles for freedom in relation to space, time and body (Becci, 2012:2)".

Introspection in prison may be hampered by the lack of privacy and space, which instead creates fear and anxiety (Irwin and Owen, 2005). In addition, the high prevalence of trauma, depression and anxiety in this population may further impede the likelihood of self-

[2] The concept of human flourishing encapsulates aspects of human potential and character development (Liebling, 2012).

reflection. Because of this struggle to survive their internal emotional turbulence, many prisoners are unlikely to capitalize on opportunities for self-development (Liebling, 2012).

These personal and structural conditions can impede personal growth, which is understood here as a process of "imagining, forming and living up to a new identity" or 'desired self'. (Liebling, 2012:9). This form of change may be integral to the desistance process, which has been described as "gradually acquiring a set of more virtuous dispositions" (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011: 21) and entailing a "moral and emotional journey requiring considerable reflection on the self" (Liebling, 2012:9).

Those who do thrive in prison often have a "containing framework" (Koch 1994: 71); ideology and "sense of connection" (O'Donnell, 2014:256). Yoga's potential to provide such a framework by unlocking self-understanding has been repeatedly illustrated (see Derezotes, 2014; Rucker, 2005; Garrett, 2001). Although prison life inhibits one's ability to exercise mastery over one's environment it can, perhaps paradoxically, become a catalyst for mental freedom, wherein prisoners engage in a process of "remoulding the self" (O'Donnell, 2014: 260) and "re-imagine and recast their predicament" (250). Prisoners can discover the transformative potential of self-mastery through yoga, gaining a new awareness of one's "own truth" and "wholeness as a person" which can lead to increased self-value and an ability to take control of one's own emotions (Rucker 2005: 117; see also Parkes & Bilby, 2010). The literature suggests that yoga provides prisoners with a means to mentally detach from their physical environment and redefine their circumstances into something subjectively meaningful (Griera, 2016).

Historical Background of Yoga

Yoga is an ancient practice originating in India that dates back millennia (Swami, 2012). The most commonly referred to text, 'The Yoga Sutras of Ptanjali' was written 200 B.C and is considered the foundation of modern yoga (Riley 2004). However, most modern forms of yoga involve breathing exercises, meditation, and postures which aim to strengthen and relax the musculoskeletal system and encourage focused attention (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Heintzman, 2008). Yoga, is rapidly expanding in the West and is considered part of a new movement termed 'holistic spirituality', aimed at accomplishing "wholeness, health and well-being of body, mind and spirit" (Harris 2013: 531; see also Heelas et al. 2005). Meditation is usually practiced at the beginning or end of a yoga session, and uses mind focusing techniques to enhance concentration, relaxation, and develop a non-judgmental attitude to one's thoughts, feelings, and sensations (Teasdale et al., 1995; Nataraja, 2008).

Yoga takes on different styles depending on context and culture, and a number of different schools have emerged, often adapted to suit the needs of different individuals (Saraswati,

1981). While some forms are rooted in traditional ancient practices accentuating the spiritual dimensions such as Hatha Yoga (Hassle-Newcombe 2005), others focus more on stretching and strength building adapted to a neo-liberal Western lifestyle (Markula, 2013; Lewis, 2008 It is noteworthy that the wide variation in yoga practice around the world makes it somewhat difficult to assess cause and effect (Muirhead and Fortune, 2016). The type of yoga practised by the participants of this study centred around a series of poses and breathing techniques designed to encourage mindfulness and induce a meditative state of mind. The last 10 minutes of each class were devoted to the practice of guided meditation.

Yoga in Prison

According to the Yoga Education Trust (2015), yoga is offered as a form of rehabilitative or physical practice, often complementing more mainstream rehabilitation programmes. Although there is a wealth of research on the impact of yoga within healthcare settings (e.g. Brown & Gerbarg, 2005; Rocha et al., 2012; Vadiraja et al., 2009) only a number of studies of yoga have been conducted in prisons. Further, most of these focus on psychological and behavioural effects as closed categories, leaving out the embodied experience yoga as well as its complex spiritual and personal dimensions[3] (Norman, 2015, Auty et al., 2015, Smith, 2007). For example, Bilderbeck et al. (2013), which is arguably one of the most methodologically rigorous studies (Muirhead & Fortune, 2016), found that yoga reduced stress, improved prisoners' moods and enhanced their ability to combat mental illnesses. Similarly, Harner et al. (2010; see also Duncombe et al., 2005) found decreases in levels of depression and anxiety among female prisoners who participated in yoga classes. Finally, a conceptual meta-analysis study concluded that yoga reduced violent behaviours and improved quality of life for both staff and prisoners (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005).

However, despite the increasing popularity of yoga in prisons, it remains a largely under-researched field with few methodologically rigorous studies (Griera, 2016). That is, most studies have found positive effects but contain considerable limitations, such as: small sample sizes, the absence of comparison groups and randomized sampling (Muirhead & Fortune, 2016). Further, there is scant research on the long-term effects of yoga and its impact (if any) on recidivism. An exception to this is a study of re-incarceration rates of prisoners who took part in a yoga programme (Landau & Gross, 2008), which found that 8.5% of participants were re-incarcerated within 12 months compared to 25.2% of the

[3] For example, Nevrin (2008) advocates the need to look more deeply at the private reflections involved in practicing yoga which will require investigating the involvement of the body and "spiritual experiences" (2007:3).

control group. However, because participation in the study was completely voluntary, there is a risk that a self-selection bias could have skewed the results.

Importantly, the vast majority of the existing studies are quantitative in nature. While these studies provide valuable metrics and statistical indictors of change, they can say little about the various range of meanings individuals attach to the practice of yoga (Norman, 2015). This is to say, the over-reliance on quantitative measures and surveys omits prisoners' experiences of yoga, which may tell us more about the *actual mechanics of personal change.* It is important to highlight that quantifying the impact of yoga may lead to a degree of reductionism. For these approaches often:

> *...define yoga as a discrete series of movements and postures rather than recognising that it is located within specific social and cultural context that allows practitioners and students to offer their own motivations and definitions of what yoga means within their daily lives (Lewis, 2008:535-536).*

Similarly, Morley advocates academic analysis that engages with the direct experience of practitioners (2001:73). There is therefore a need and great scope to understand exactly how prisoners actually experience programs in practice and how they may (or may not) facilitate change or personal development.

Yoga has been found to mitigate against the denial of individual autonomy and identity in prisons by encouraging self-esteem (Derezotes, 2014) and expressions of agency through self-regulation (Rucker; 2005). It helps prisoners "to adjust mentally to the isolation and confinement" (Grey, 1988:181) by "promoting orientation towards the present" (O'Donnell, 2014:254). An evaluation of a prison yoga programme found "exceedingly positive" responses indicating less stress, more rational decision making and a commitment to continue yoga and make long term physical and mental improvements (Da Silva & Hartney, 2012:7).

However, Rucker (2005) is among the few qualitative studies of yoga in prison that explores the *personal journeys of prisoners.* It tracked seven participants throughout their participation in a yoga programme spanning from 3-12 months. The study showed promising results including an increase in emotion regulation, self-worth, self-nurturance and compassion. Yet, there was a high attrition rate in this study (52% of the original sample dropped out) which may indicate that there are important, yet unexplored reasons, why yoga may not be beneficial for everyone. A separate qualitative study evaluated the effects of yoga on 14 adolescent sex offenders analysed data from the participants themselves, as well as from parents and social workers (Derezotes, 2014). The participants reported having gained useful skills such as improved concentration, spiritual development and self-control.

However, this study was conducted in the wider community rather than the unique confines of the prison setting.[4]

While not the primary focus of this study, there are a number of studies mindfulness based programmes that report a positive impact on prisoners' well-being (Himelstein, 2011; Lyons & Cantrell, 2015; Shonin et al., 2013). These findings include reduced substance abuse, overcoming addictions, increased self-control (Bowen et al., 2006; Simpson et al., 2007) and significant improvements in anger management (Howells et al., 2010). Further, important meaningful impacts on prisoner rehabilitation include improvements in interpersonal relationships with other prisoners' and staff and positive "unique social atmospheres" (Ronel et al., 2013).

The literature suggests that yoga in prison is also used as a means of transcending one's circumstances, and exploring spiritual dimensions that can provide a sense of purpose and empowerment in prison (Griera, 2016, Auty et al., 2015). For example, Derezotes (2014) found that all but one participant felt yoga assisted them in their spiritual development. Spirituality has been defined as "the personal quest for understanding the answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community" (Koenig et al., 2001: 18).

Furthermore, Griera (2016) found that through yoga prisoners could transcend ordinary reality and enter into a "finite province of meaning" where reality took on a "different taste, texture, and color" (Griera, 2016:20). The author argued that prisoners acquired new spiritual concepts, ideas, and beliefs that provided moral guidance and informed daily conduct. Yoga then, became a system of meaning or "symbolic universe" that relates the experience of everyday life to a 'transcendent' layer of reality'' (Luckmann 1967:43). These acts of self-transcendence were the most appreciated aspects of practising yoga in prison in Griera's study. This current study sets out to explore these issues of spirituality and self-transcendence in some depth.

Rehabilitation, Yoga and Prison

Despite the positive effects listed here, the efficacy of yoga as an alternative form of rehabilitation remains questionable (Silva & Hartney, 2012; Norman, 2015). Nevertheless, yoga and rehabilitation share common goals; namely attempting to foster personal growth

[4] Indeed, many studies have been undertaken outside of prison walls, the most relevant of which include those relating to yoga's potential as a treatment for mood disorders, stress, anxiety, substance abuse, aggression and hopelessness (Muirhead & Fortune, 2016; Fjorback et al., 2011; Himelstein, 2011; Khoury et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2011; Samuelson et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2011).

and self-integration (Auty et al., 2015). Recent research suggests that structured and carefully managed sport programmes can have a positive impact desistance (Meek 2012, Meek and Lewis, 2013). Further studies have stressed the importance of including artistic and spiritual activities in rehabilitative plans to address offenders' varied and diverse needs (Parkes & Bilby, 2010:1; O'Connor & Duncan 2011). In line with these findings, yoga may also encourage reintegration into society and desistance from crime by helping individuals embrace an alternative identity. The following section will provide a brief overview of current prison rehabilitation in order to understand how yoga may fit into this framework.

There are two major approaches to rehabilitation in prison. The deficit based Risk-Need-Responsivity ('RNR') model, targets criminogenic needs, i.e. factors predictive of offending and offers support in managing these (Maruna and LeBel, 2002). Yoga's potential to reduce substance abuse (Khalsa et al. 2013, aggression (Desphande et al., 2008) as well as emotional reactivity and self-control (Froeliger et al., 2012; Bilderbeck et al., 2013) means that it could be aligned with these RNR models. However, this risk-need model, neglects the role of individual agency and by only highlighting deficits, could be both stigmatizing and damaging to an individual's ability to envisage a future self.

By contrast, the Good Lives Model ('GLM') promotes existing strengths and encourages individuals to accomplish life goals. It attempts to achieve this by equipping offenders with the necessary internal and external resources (Maruna & LeBel, 2002; Ward and Brown, 2011). According to Muirheaad and Fortune's literature review (2016), yoga may be compatible with the promotion of inner resources such as freedom from stress (see also Sharma & Haider, 2013), enhanced concentration and academic/professional performance (see also Derezotes 2000) and optimistic thinking (see also Bilderbeck et al., 2013). In addition, if used alongside other treatment interventions, yoga may indirectly contribute to their efficacy by increasing an individual's ability to participate in such interventions (Muirheaad and Fortune, 2016; Himelstein, 2011). In the aforementioned Derezotes' (2014) study all participants reported that the training helped them concentrate, perform better at school, and avoid re-offending. However, yoga also provides the necessary space for individuals for introspection (see section above on inward change), freedom to experience internal aspects of agency and self-directed character development. Therefore, for yoga to be effective, it should follow a strength-based approach as these interventions create conditions which encourage personal development. This acknowledges the importance of *personal choice* in the formation of a new non-offending identity.

The recent emergence of so-called 'Positive criminology' emphasizes the importance of a "more comprehensive recovery paradigm" involving development of the physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, and occupational health (Best, 2010; McNeill, 2006; White & Kurtz,

2005). This represents a movement away from more traditional 'problem and treatment only' forms of rehabilitation (Ronel et al., 2013:135). Rucker (2015) identifies yoga as fitting into this category and distinguishes it from common forms of 'treatment' in prison which "can very easily become coercive" (118).

A recent qualitative study by Griera and Clot-Garrell (2015) found that holistic' practices, such as yoga, have gained popularity with a new rehabilitation model emerging from trends in prison governance towards "individualisation of the prison sentence" (Malveneti & Gerreaud, 2008:9). In light of this, the rehabilitative benefits of yoga are translated into terms of "personal transformation, self-responsibility and self-management of individual behaviour" (Griera and Clot-Garrell, 2015:154). This shift towards prisoner self-regulation is not the primary focus here, but it provides and indispensable context for this research.

Research Questions

A number of academics have addressed yoga in prison, but few have addressed the precise meanings that prisoners attach to it. Therefore, this study sets out to explore the following questions:

1) How do prisoners experience yoga and what meanings do they attach to their practice?
2) What are the consequences, if any, of practicing yoga for prisoners'
    a) day to day lives?
    b) personal development?

Chapter 3

Methods

This research sets out to understand the experience of yoga in prison using an exploratory approach. This allowed for various possible meanings, reflections and interpretations to emerge, untainted by hypothesis selection and preconceptions (Giorgi, 1986). Instead, a mixed-methods qualitative approach, based primarily on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis of letters from prisoners, was used. This triangulation of methods broadens the scope for accessing prisoners' thoughts, emotions and experiences (Flick, 2007). The holistic nature of yoga—which crosses the boundaries of therapeutic, spiritual, sports and popular culture—provided the rationale for this qualitative approach (Griera, 2016:21).

To distinguish the letters written by prisoners from the data collected during interviews, the phrase 'letter writers' is used, while 'interviewees' indicates the latter. When addressing both groups the word 'prisoners' will be used. For further clarification, quotations from letter writers will include an 'L' following the names of the prisoners (e.g. Smith-L) but quotations from interviewees are left unmarked (e.g. Smith).

Site Selection and Access

An application was made to the NOMS Research Committee to gain access to two research sites, a category C male sex offenders prison (HMP Littlehey), and a closed category female prison (HMP Send), both of which are publically run. These prisons were selected because they offered a weekly yoga programme (a one and a half hour class per week). The sex-offenders population was not chosen with any specific intent: the establishment was selected mainly for practical purposes, due to its close proximity and established contacts between Cambridge University's Prison Research Centre (PRC) and the prison governor. Nevertheless, researching in a sex offender's prison illustrates the practitioners' experiences in a rather unique context. The rationale for selecting a male and female prison related to initial aims to explore gender-based similarities and differences in the practice of yoga. Negotiating access was facilitated by contacts within the PRC and contact was made with both prison governors. Unfortunately however, given the time constraints of this research, and in light of the considerable difficulties and delays in negotiating access at the women's prison, it was not feasible to continue pursuing access. A decision was made to conduct the research solely at the male prison with increased numbers of interviews. It is worth highlighting that the gender component of this research, while possibly providing a more

textured understanding of how men and women relate to yoga, was not the main focus. Therefore, its elimination did not impact significantly on the initial research design but permitted a more in-depth focus on the primary research questions.

Sampling

The interview sample was drawn from prisoners who regularly attended the yoga class. In collaboration with the Head of Education, from a list of 30 prisoners who attended the class, 12 were randomly selected and invited to participate in the research.[5] However, on the last day of interviewing, one of the interviewees was taken to hospital and therefore unable to participate. The total number of prisoners interviewed was 11. The only selection criterion was that interviewees represented a broad range of ages so as to minimise the risk of age-related biases. Because of its explorative nature of this research, it was not appropriate to systematically investigate differences based on age, race, sentence length or type. Nevertheless, these factors may be important as yoga could have distinct effects, depending upon such demographic factors and sentencing conditions (see 'limitations' section below for further discussion).

The sample group consisted of eight prisoners of White British origin, one Eastern European, one Asian and one Irish prisoner. This is representative of the prisons overall ethnic makeup: 67% White British, 1.6% Irish, 4.4% White Other and 7.3% Asian (HM Chief Inspector of Prison, 2015). The mean age was 55, the youngest being 36 and the oldest 67. In the sample group, older prisoners were slightly overrepresented as the prisoner population was predominantly in their early to mid 40s (HM Chief Inspector of Prison, 2015). Their average sentence length was six years, and the shortest was two and a half years. One prisoner had served 19 years of a life sentence and another had served six years on IPP sentence (with a four year tariff). By comparison, most of the wider prisoner population had sentences ranging from 4 years to less than 10 years. These statistics and comparisons suggest that on prima facie there were no clearly observable skews in the data (aside from age).

Interviews

Using interviews was well suited to the exploratory nature of this research as it gives room to the interviewee to provide an in-depth account of their experience and perspective (Hammersley, 2013). The semi-structured design allows for a degree of flexibility: different themes and sub-themes can be discussed in a fluid, non-linear way and participants are given space to expand and develop their thoughts and to focus on issues of importance to

[5] It is unknown whether anyone declined to be interviewed.

them (Kvale, 1996). This meant that it was not necessary to stick rigidly to questions, and instead, new themes and insights could emerge. Nevertheless, the interviews were guided by an interview schedule (see Appendix 1), split into thematic categories (Smith, 2007). The subtopics on the schedule were drawn from existing literature on the practice of yoga in prison and were also informed by the prisoner letters. The questions focused on: general experiences of yoga and meditation; how this practice may (or may not) impact upon their ability to cope with prion life; and their conceptions of 'the self'.[6] The use of semi-structured interviews aimed to prevent prior assumptions and preconceptions from influencing the data, instead letting themes emerge organically (Layder, 1998) while facilitating comparisons between interviewees having been "exposed to the same uniform set of stimuli (i.e. questions)" (Denzin, 1970:126).

The interviews ranged from 34 to 55 minutes with an average length of 45 minutes. They were conducted over three days. Interviews took place at the legal visits centre to which prisoners were escorted by prison officers. This interview location may have a distinctive set of meanings for prisoners that could have impacted on the way prisoners behaved and spoke. Indeed, some prisoners expressed having felt slightly nervous when asked to attend the legal visitors centre. The timing of the interviews was stipulated by prison staff, and strict adherence to this schedule was required. This meant that that the maximum length of each interview was one hour so that there would be sufficient time to conduct all the interviews scheduled for that day. Given the fact that it may take some time for some interviewees to feel sufficiently at ease, adhering to this strict timeframe could have affected the quality of the responses. To this end, on two occasions the interviews felt slightly rushed and were ended abruptly by prison officers.

Although there was no opportunity to build rapport with prisoners prior to the interview they appeared to speak freely, and often enthusiastically, about their experiences. My impression was that I was able to strike rapport with the interviewees, which appeared to result, in part, from a shared interest in yoga. Still, any accounts about how my personal characteristics may have influenced prisoners' feelings, perceptions and communication are speculative.

Many researchers have highlighted the particular challenges of interviewing sex offenders (e.g. Waldram, 2007; Roberts 2011), especially as a woman (Hudson 2005). However, no references were made to my gender during the interview, nor did any difficult or unusual matters arise. This may be due to the fact that the topic of my interview was perceived as

[6] 'The self" is defined here as "the entire set of beliefs, evaluations, perceptions, and thoughts that people have about themselves" (Swann and Bosson, 2010: 591).

benign and did not concern sentencing outcomes or probe into the details of their offence history. However, one prisoner became emotionally distressed when asked to describe the feelings he experienced during yoga. Despite my concern, and offer to seek support from prison staff (see ethics section below) or move on to a different question, he wished to continue. Although emotionally challenging at first, through attentive listening along with a compassionate attitude, the prisoner gradually began to feel at ease. After the interview, he expressed appreciation for the cathartic experience. There was a wide degree of variance in the way in which interviewees responded to questions, with some giving lengthy and detailed answers while others only engaged more with verbal prompts and encouragement.

Letters

The letters used in this research were made available by the Prison Phoenix Trust ("the Trust"); a charity established in 1988 with to the intention of introducing yoga and meditation to prisoners by providing regular classes across prisons in the UK and Ireland. In addition, the Trust "offer[s] individual support to prisoners and prison staff through teaching, correspondence, books and newsletters" (the Trust's online website). Contact with the Director of the Trust was established via academic links at Cambridge University. My initial exploration of the letters involved attending the premises and reading 30 letters sent to the Trust by prisoners. These were selected randomly and written by 10 prisoners from different UK prisons and spanned from 2008 until 2015. An additional number of 150 electronic letters were provided to me in electronic format for practical purposes and were drawn upon in the analysis of this research. These letters were written by about 120 different authors, mainly male, and spanned approximately across the past 10 years. They range from brief and more neutral notes to lengthy descriptions of prisoners' experiences with yoga.

Limitations

The use of letters as a valid methodical resource in criminological research is a contested issue, as there are some important limitations to consider (Morgan, 1999). For example, the 150 electronic letters had already been screened for publication and commended by the Phoenix Trust. This may present issues of self-selection, as it is possible that the most positive testimonies were collated, and prisoners more critical of yoga might be less likely to write letters to the Trust. Nevertheless, this does not deny the value and validity of these testimonials. Prisoners' letters appear to be motivated by a genuine desire to share their accounts and many testimonies included intricate details (both positive and negative) about their practice. The fact that prisoners included negative or neutral testimonies makes sense in light of the Trusts' endeavours to provide support to prisoners, many of whom seek assistance to help make sense of their experiences.

Another methodological difficulty arising from the use of letters is the fact that they may only describe a specific, or highly selective, aspect of a prisoners experience in relation to yoga rather than addressing a number of diverse topics (Reuss & Wilson, 2000). However, what prisoners' do choose to write about is revealing as it highlights issues of particular importance to them. The strength of letters as a source is that "they provide valuable unfiltered insight into motivations and experiences" and represent "spontaneous expressions of prisoners' thoughts and ideas at the time of writing" without the risk of an interviewer "asking potentially leading questions" (Reuss & Wilson, 2000:140).

The interviews provided an opportunity to further investigate underexplored issues that were identified in the letters.[7] But the reliability of interview data may be affected by classic concerns such as an imbalance of power in interviewer-interviewee relationships (Seidman, 2013), the difficulties of memory reconstruction and self-presentation concerns (Hammersley, 2003). It did not appear that any of these factors came into play during interview (although it is sometimes difficult to ascertain this information) with the exception of one interview, wherein the interviewee explicitly presented some contradictions, apparently resulting from memory loss.

As participation in the yoga class, as well as the research is entirely voluntary, the prisoners within the sample (both letter writers and interviewees) may be motivated towards self-development or have more pro-social attitudes. It is worth noting then that participants may not have been representative of the general population per se, but rather a specific 'prisoner type' (see Crewe, 2009), to whom yoga appeals. This does not deny the significance of what has been reported here, but may suggest that future research could further investigate what leads people to yoga. Motivations and goals for engaging with yoga are highly versatile, as demonstrated in this study.[8] This suggests that yoga offers diverse advantages and appealed to a wide range of different personality types.

Lastly, it may be relevant that this research took place in a prison for sex offenders. Prisoners may find it easier to engage with yoga in this establishment than in a 'mains prison' (for general population prisoners), which are typically marked by more rigid forms of masculinity and normative values that could serve to stigmatize yoga and alternative practices.

[7] Indeed, much of the interview schedule was based on findings and insights from the letters.

[8] Questions of motivation were specifically addressed in this study.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded using a digital Dictaphone and subsequently transcribed verbatim so that all the data would be given equal consideration in the analysis (Seidman, 2013). Although the use of a recording device may alter the behaviour, and levels of disclosure, it adds significant value to the data analysis by capturing silences, repetition and tone (Crewe, 2009; Jewkes, 2002). Drawing on adaptive theory, knowledge of existing theories (deduction) was combined with empirically grounded theory construction (induction) to form the analysis (Layder, 1998). More specifically, the interview and letter data was analysed using the categories set out in the interview schedule. The data was then reviewed multiple times so that themes could be identified: connections and patterns were grouped into initial thematic categories such as 'perspectives on yoga', 'coping with imprisonment' and 'transformative accounts'. These general codes were then refined into subordinate themes (e.g. motivations, body awareness, coping with time) and finally translated into a narrative account (Smith, 2007).

Ethics

In order to ensure fair, accurate and anonymous representations, steps were taken to respect the dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing of participants and letter writers. For the interviewees, this included informed consent, confidentiality and data protection (Ellis and Gregory, 2010). Ethical approval was sought and granted both by NOMS as well as the Institute of Criminology's Research Ethics Committee. Only letters for which the Phoenix Trust had already sought and obtained permission for the purpose of publication were included in this research. Prior to the interview commencing, all participants were provided with consent forms (Appendix 2) and information sheets (Appendix 3) containing a description of the study and of the use of data. Permission was also sought to record the interviews using a digital Dictaphone. Participants were informed that confidentiality would be maintained, unless safety concerns or issues regarding potential security breaches arouse. There was some potential for emotionally evocative material to arise and steps were taken to minimise any risks of discomfort or distress such as phrasing questions in a careful manner and having available information about support mechanisms. With the exception of the above-mentioned case, there were no such instances. Further, participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage, to decline to answer questions, to exclude anything discussed from the study and to ask any questions relevant to the research. They were also informed that participation had no effect on their sentence outcomes.

Guidelines stipulated by the Data Protection act 1998 were adhered to in terms of storage of digital audio data, letters and written transcripts. The Dictaphone data was erased at once the data had been uploaded onto an encrypted memory stick. The personal data collected will also be erased following completion of this research. Pseudonyms were substituted for interviewees' and letter writers' real names to ensure anonymity and enable participants to speak more frankly. Similarly, confidentiality was protected by either modifying or excluding personally identifying information.

Chapter 4

The Experience of Yoga

Motivation

Prisoners generally spoke in positive terms about their experiences of the yoga class, typically describing it as peaceful and calming. While many prisoners were motivated to start yoga to alleviate physical ailments, increase strength or flexibility, over time they began to recognise and explore alternative, and perhaps unexpected, benefits: "Now I have become more interested in the other side of yoga, the way it releases stress and exercises muscle whilst creating positive energy" (Rob-L). For others, initial reluctance yielded to an appreciation of yoga's more-than-physical benefits.

> *I used to keep asking...why am I sitting here counting my breath, what's it for?...For some reason it worked and I have carried on doing it. I don't question it anymore.* [Carl]

For most prisoners then, the motivation to continue practising yoga evolved with the realisation of its notable improvements in physical health, and the opportunities it offered for self-exploration and personal development.

Physical experiences of yoga

It is said that there are moments during the practice of yoga "in which the practitioner is overwhelmed by anxiety or physical effort." (Baranay, 2004:245). Indeed, for those who considered yoga to be physically painful and highly challenging this statement represents an accurate reflection of their experience. Others, however, found it relatively easy describing deep focus on movement, body and breath, unsurprising perhaps given the wide range of ages, flexibility and levels of physical fitness. There was a widespread consensus that yoga is not a 'quick fix solution' but rather requires conscious effort, intent and persistence. Prisoners noticed that to achieve the benefits, hard work was required; a realisation that sometimes contradicted their former attitude of expecting instant results. Through practicing yoga, prisoners found hidden reservoirs of self-discipline and felt a long-term sense of achievement. Most interviewees showed a high-level of commitment to the discipline, and proudly claimed to have never voluntarily missed a class. Often the prison environment was at odds with supporting this commitment and many prisoners expressed disappointment over being unable to attend the yoga class due to clashes with mandatory rehabilitation programmes. This strong loyalty was reflected in the number of prisoners who began to practice yoga independently: over half of the interviewees did yoga in their cells. All

of the interviewees meditated on a regular basis, the majority doing so daily. The 'extra' commitment to independent mediation may reflect the difficulties of practising yoga in a shared cell (due to spatial limitations) and, as one interviewee asserted, fear of judgment.

Many interviewees and letter writers were able to cultivate a meditative state of mind in their daily lives by incorporating breathing techniques into their routine:

> *when you are counting your breaths, you learn to...accept thoughts and make sense of them and get back to doing things in a calm and collected way. And you can do that on the football field as well."* [Gary]

Gary's words highlight that yoga had significant impacts beyond its immediate physical benefits, and could "become a way of life" [Arnold-L]. Crucially, this form of daily meditation appears to have positive implications for the way prisoners behaved in other areas of the prison; for example, on the football field (as Gary states), where provocation and violence were generally more likely to occur. According to Goffman "staying out of trouble is likely to require persistent conscious effort" (1961:43). Many prisoners made similar observations about the difficulty of leading a peaceful life in prison, but expressed that their meditative mind-set had made it considerably easier. However, in contrast to Goffmans' claim (which implies active effort), staying away from violence was not a matter of conscious effort, but rather a by-product of yoga stemming from its subtle effects on the mind. This may have significant implications for staff and prisoner safety and further research is required to explore how yoga might help promote non-violence and secure custodial environments.

Prisoners frequently struggled to articulate their experiences of yoga and meditation: according to Fred it was "an inner feeling that is quite hard to describe". Using visualisation techniques, prisoners could allow pleasing thoughts and memories to drift through their minds, enabling them to escape to: "birds, streams, trees, the rustle of leaves and winds and the flowers smell sweet." [Bob-L]. Another interviewee described meditation as "travelling into light" [Harry]. Interestingly, many prisoners used *natural imagery* to convey their experience of yoga and meditation: "I feel like a peaceful lake with occasionally choppy waters" [Igor]. The ability to escape mentally into these natural worlds at will, provided a means for prisoners to cope with sensory discomforts such as "claustrophobia" [Fred], "the lighting" [Igor] and "the cold...the noise, the banging and the shouting" [Mohammed-L]. Instead, they were able to experience pleasant sensory stimulation. This could be an invaluable coping mechanism, given the fact that the prison environment is often so bereft of such physical imagery. Indeed, the visual spectacle of the prison (with its harsh concrete architecture, metal gates and fences) is almost the direct antithesis of the 'natural' world (Hancock and Jewkes, 2011). While much has been documented about boredom in prison

(e.g. Liebling, 1992; Knight, 2016), this form of visual 'stagnation' and separation from the natural world, may stand alone as an acute, and underexplored, pain of imprisonment. Considering the fact that natural outdoor environments can influence individuals' psychological well-being (Ulrich, 1979), there may also be potential long-term benefits of being able to visualise nature.

The Yoga Class

Although yoga can be a solitary experience, feelings of togetherness and belonging prevailed during the yoga class:[9]

> *It's like we share something that is on another level, separate to everything else...There is something about that shared experience, that feeling of oneness." [Bruno]*

Spickard (1991:197) suggests that ritualistic experiences that focus on the "ebb and flow" of an activity can create a "profoundly social experience" of being "in tune" with one another and sharing an inner time and consciousness. In line with this, many accounts of the yoga class focused on the positive experience of feeling in sync with others through breathing, movement and specific poses. Some spoke enthusiastically about the classes fostering an atmosphere of "oneness, community and belonging" [Bruno]. This was attributed to the common experience of having a 'shared objective' and being 'surrounded by like-minded people' [Eddie]. These experiences are, to some extent, mirrored by Griera's (2016;12) findings that, during yoga, Collin's (2004) notion of a 'collective energy' prevails, which enables prisoners to transcend the prison walls and shift "into another (transcendent) reality" (Greira, 2014: 12).

Furthermore, for some the class provided a space for bonding and an opportunity for authentic self-expression: *"After the class..., all nine participants sat together and spoke freely with hope, awe, good spirit and agreement. This was extremely empowering and I witnessed a deep change in all present." (Darrell – L).* Given the difficulties of expressing authentic feelings and emotions in an environment that is 'highly performative' (Crewe et al, 2014), programmes such as yoga could create spaces where a ''broader emotional register'' is permitted (Crewe et al., 2013:12)—and thus encourage social bonding.[10] The yoga class may represent a particular 'emotional zone' where ''the display of a wider range of feelings than

[9] Most of the accounts of those who practise yoga alone in their cell suggest that far from feeling isolated, they used the solitude as a way to recharge.

[10] authenticity in the prison literature is defined as "being oneself" and acting in a way that is consistent with one's behavior outside of prison (Crewe, 2009: 433; Laws and Crewe, 2015)

elsewhere in the prison'' (Crewe et al., 2013:218), or what Johnson (1987) describes as 'sanctuaries', offering a 'shelter' from the rigid and aggressive prison culture.

Indeed, prisoners experienced the yoga class as a shared and safe environment where there was no "no abuse, foul language or mucking about" [Eddie]. It was, by contrast, characterised by commitment, solidarity and a genuine willingness to engage. Most prisoners claimed that this arose from the non-judgmental and non-competitive atmosphere in classes, which become a place of respite and serenity. Some even openly described their appreciation for feeling "looked after" [Gary] during the classes. Conversely, one prisoner perceived some competitiveness but acknowledged that it was "still no where near the type of competition in the gym" [Harry]. Participants also expressed an appreciation for the yoga teacher's invitatory language, which promoted personal choice in relation to the duration and degree of effort required in the yoga postures. The teacher played a vital role in creating an environment of ease and familiarity. Through her attentive and compassionate nature, interviewees reported feeling comfortable and cared for. For many, this was a restorative experience, and contrasted with attitudes commonly displayed by prison staff.

Masculinity and perceptions of yoga

The nurturing, slow paced nature of yoga stands in stark contrast to the broader context of prisoner culture and other forms of exercise available, described by Carl as a "sort of full pelt training [where] you are not in control because you are always trying to go harder, faster, stronger". In these activities competitiveness, speed and physical strength are the markers of success. This may be caused by, and perpetuate, dominant ideals of masculinity that can contribute to more aggressive and hostile prison cultures (Sabo et al., 2001; Messner, 1992). Increasing the popularity of yoga in prison could lead to more prisoners embracing the values represented by yoga, such as patience and kindness towards the self, resulting in the emergence of new forms of masculinity and a more peaceful prison environment.

To some extent this was already taking place. When asked about general perceptions of yoga in prison amongst other non-practising prisoners the majority of interviewees stated that they felt yoga was "well respected" [David] and that there was an increasing curiosity and interest.[11] One prisoner found that that yoga changed his perspective in relation to his own masculine identity in a way that enabled him to embrace his introspective nature. These observations resonate with the notion that yoga represents an alternative "physical culture that does not emulate or replicate hyper-competitive, hierarchical and patriarchal modern sport" (Atkinson, 2010:1250).

[11] Although these speculations may be different from what the wider population *actually* thought.

In contrast to the above, some interviewees admitted to having negative opinions about the yoga class before they joined and expressed concerns that it could threaten their masculine image. One interviewee identified two primary reactions from other non-practising prisoners: firstly, the belief that those who practise yoga do it for the wrong reasons (such as being around female yoga teachers), and secondly, that yoga is for elderly prisoners. While claiming to be exempt from this cynicism, he argued that yoga was less common for those with muscular physiques who tended to use the gym and play football. Notably, this prisoner was the youngest amongst the interviewees. A possible explanation for these differences of opinions could be that yoga increases in popularity with maturity and is therefore more acceptable among—and perceived differently by—older prisoners.

Tuning in to the body

According to Smith, "at any given moment most if not all of our body is absent from our consciousness" which significantly affects how one engages with the world (Smith 2007:38); see also Leder, 1990). Many prisoners were surprised to realize how little awareness they had of their own bodies. Focusing on the body and breathing turned the orientation of attention inwards, leading to a deep form of engagement. During this process the exterior world seemed to disappear and prisoners could sometimes enter altered states of consciousness, finding freedom and serenity: "The exercises was [sic] out of this world, and for the hour I was doing it, I wasn't in prison, I was free" [Ronald-L].

Prisoners' testimonies revealed an inherent interconnectedness between the mind, body and emotions: "As you practise yoga more, you begin to see more obviously how intimately connected your breath and emotions are" [Anton]. It facilitated a body-based, present moment awareness and a 'tuning in' to the body, which promoted a sense of inner safety and balance. A reason for this suggested by the literature is that body based activities such as yoga, involve 'the systematic enhancement of body experience', employing the body as 'a crucial medium of self-development' (Leder, 1990: 153).

A heightened sense of bodily awareness may be particularly beneficial for those suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), among whom prisoners are overrepresented (Goff et al., 2007). PSTD sufferers often feel disconnected from, and unsafe in, their own bodies (Emerson and Hopper, 2011). Trauma leaves a physical and emotional imprint on the body that can be the cause of self-harm and self-abusive behaviours (Rothschild, 2000). Both interviewees and letter writers reported that doing yoga helped them to become more aware of the abuse they had inflicted on their bodies through self-harm and drugs. Subsequently, they were better able to control their self-abusive behaviour. For example, Arnold (L) expressed his grief about his previous drug use and having treated his body "badly

for so long", but after starting yoga he began "looking after himself". Another prisoner appreciated becoming more comfortable with parts of his body, from which he had previously felt detached.[12] This increased 'connection with the body' arises from a conscious awareness of the physical sensations and control of movement in yoga: a process through which the 'absent body' becomes a 'present body' (Leder, 1990). Increased body awareness was also beneficial to prisoners unaffected by trauma. Many reported previously being unable to identify bodily needs and "ploughing on with anything" without giving consideration to the body. (Fred). Through yoga, they gained the ability to read their bodily cues more accurately: "I have learned to listen to...and understand the body more." [Gary].

Listening to the signals communicated by their bodies enabled prisoners to become aware of their needs, making better health choices. Consequently, prisoners took steps towards self-care and set personal limits. For example, Alfie felt naturally inclined to push himself, but began to put boundaries in place, making choices that reduced stress on his body and mind. He gave up football, because did not consider it to be "a calming part of my life and my mindset...Time for me to be a bit more goal-oriented" [Alfie]. Alfie's choice to remove himself from situations that might kindle aggressive behaviour resonates with the concept of 'diachronic self–control'; a common strategy used by desisting individuals in maintaining non-offending lifestyle changes (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011).

Imprisonment "affects the most basic aspects of the inmates' selves: the control over their own body'' (Becci, 2012:91). Yoga can mitigate against the experience of powerlessness and the loss of authority over the body, by restoring feelings of control:

> *I have learned that there is a lot of ability in being able to stand on one leg and not wobble, which is not something anybody had ever asked me to do before. 'How high can you kick you leg?' 'How fast can you run?' But not, 'can you be still?' And I find that really relaxing, its sort of a deep relaxing, not just a physical relaxing. [Bruno]*

For Bruno, bodily awareness was also linked to the promotion of controlled and gentle forms of movement, and a burgeoning appreciation of stillness and balance on a physical and mental level. He discovered a new source of inner strength, resilience and control, giving him "a completely different outlook to before". This chapter set-out to explore the various experiential contours of the yoga class in prison. In the following chapter, more will be said about the physical and psychological benefits of this practice, and especially how it improved relationships with others.

[12] This prisoner speculated that his feelings disconnected from parts of his body may have been the result of past physical abuse

Chapter 5

Coping with Imprisonment through Yoga

> *Yoga has carried me through some of the hardest moments in prison I think any man or woman could bear. It has given me inner strength and the ability to control emotions that would have at one time wreaked havoc [Bill-L].*

The prison setting "presents extraordinary adaptive problems" for prisoners (Irwin, 1970/1987: 67). Yoga helped prisoners to alleviate the various pains of imprisonment, including issues related to health, rumination, time and isolation. These themes have been covered thoroughly in the broader sociology of imprisonment literature but little has been said about how yoga may support prisoners through their sentences. This chapter begins by discussing some of these different areas and exploring their role within the wider literature.

Yoga had particular significance to prisoners as it offered a means of maintaining both physical and mental health in an otherwise 'unhealthy' and stressful environment. It is at times hard to make neat distinctions between physical and mental effects, and many aspects of yoga seem to harness both. This chapter proceeds with this imperfect, but still useful, division of the mind body binary to explore the findings. Almost all prisoners considered yoga to be a valuable coping strategy, often referring to it "in times of need" as a "tool to tackle any negativity" [Roger-L]. A number of prisoners even found it to be the only effective "way of combating the stress of prison life" [Edna - L]:

> "I can't think of a better antidote to the pressures of prison than meditation and yoga. Without them, I might have been broken." [Ted-L].

When asked to compare yoga to other activities, it was usually distinguished by its unique relaxing effects and ability to control the mind and "influence and calm... thought processes" [Alfie].

Physical Benefits

The vast majority of both interviewed prisoners and letters writers claimed that yoga had considerably improved aspects of their physical health and overall fitness—such as increased strength, reduced joint and muscular pain. Given the limited opportunities for physical movement in their daily routines, such improvements were highly valued.

Yoga could also increase tolerance of, or even eliminate pain: "I can forget my aches and pains which is definitely amazing coz [sic] I've been in a lot of pain." [Daniel – L]. Many prisoners suffering from chronic pain and illnesses such as asthma attributed an

improvement in their condition to yoga and claimed that it had enabled them to stop taking prescribed medication. Specifically, the regular application of yogic breathing techniques was described as having led to a reduction in asthma attacks, anxiety and panic attacks. Indeed, many prisoners acknowledged and articulated the effects of yogic breathing on their physical (and mental wellbeing): "you calm down and your heart rate drops...And then I feel like I can carry on and reach a state of equilibrium again" [Harry].[13] Attending to the breath was perceived as a way of increasing strength and resilience. In light of the immense strain on healthcare in prisons due to limited financial resources, an aging population and political benchmarking (Williams et al., 2007; Watson et al., 2004), yoga may be considered a valuable form of 'front end' prevention, to help alleviate such pressures.

For some, yoga also provided relief from stress-related physical ailments such as headaches and stiffness. Furthermore, many prisoners found that this form of stress relief improved both the duration and quality of sleep due to an enhanced ability to 'relax the mind' and the benign physical exertion involved in yoga. This is significant given that for a large part of the prison population, insomnia is a common and serious problem that has been linked to suicide prevalence (Carli et al., 2011; Liebling, 1992).

Perhaps most significantly, the majority of prisoners found that yoga played a role in managing their addictions, especially to cigarettes, methadone and heroin. This often functioned indirectly, through the ability to 'quieten the mind' or evoke positive thoughts and memories: "I remember the butterflies, birds and scents of summer, even when it rained there was a beautiful aroma in the air, gold autumn evenings.... These pleasant thoughts and yoga are far better than any drug" [Jeremy-L]. Other prisoners also drew parallels between yoga and drug use. For example, some found it to have safe and desirable, consciousness-altering effects: "you get the best buzz ever through meditating, and there is not a drug in the world that could ever come anywhere close" [Irvin-L]. In this manner, yoga can be seen as a form of drug replacement therapy, helping to alleviate the physical pains at the core of the drug addiction: "To be honest with you for quite some time cannabis and alcohol have been my pain relief." [Jim-L] Further, finding meaning and purpose through yoga contributed to successful recovery from addiction: "I never ever thought anything could replace the void filled by drugs until I discovered meditation" [Gerry-L]. It is not always possible to know how accurate these positive causal attributions to yoga and their health were. However, the conviction with which prisoners expressed these sentiments was persuasive.

[13] It is particularly salient here that the physical and mental effects of yoga often mesh and merge together.

Psychological Effects

'Over-thinking' in prison was the most significant cause of stress and anxiety for the interviewees, who found the experience emotionally exhausting. Yoga was perceived to provide respite from "the chaos that is the human mind" [Bruno], and its ability "to plague and dominate" [Ron-L]. One letter writer explained that: "my mind is like a crazy octopus with it's legs flailing about wildly, desperately trying to cling onto things. When I sit the octopus legs calm down and I experience a sense of release" [Joseph-L].

This peace of mind was sometimes explained as the result of the intense focus cultivated in yoga classes, which deepen concentration and induces a feeling of being 'in the zone'. This provided prisoners with a resource to stop "dwelling on banal things" [Bruno], and gain insights into the nature of the mind: "yoga and meditation have taught me that the mind is just a tool, and only a fool will allow the hammer to decide what it hits! You use the tool, the tool doesn't use you" [Harry]. Similarly, Kent stated that: "sometimes it not just the outside world that created hell, it is us we create ourselves so much turmoil, emotional turmoil, intellectual turmoil." In sum, prisoners could gain a deeper understanding about the nature of suffering through yoga which emphasised their individual responsibility for, and control over, their mental processes. Such realisations encouraged adaption by enhanced prisoners' confidence in their capacity to cope: "I no longer worry how I will handle my sentence because through yoga I found coping mechanisms within myself" [Edna-L].

Due to the challenges of sharing one's feelings and opening up to others, many prisoners frequently manage their emotions (and cope with prison life) through suppression (Laws and Crewe, 2015). However, for participants in this study yoga represented an alternative solution to "cracking up, exploding, smoking a joint, dropping a pill" when "emotional and psychological pains and torments start" [Jeremy-L]. Interviewees and letter writers expressed that "bottling up emotions" and neglecting to "deal with problems"[Jud - L] only led to emotional outbursts: "it boils up and your mind can explode [Alfie]." Through yoga however, prisoners became more open to feeling; learning to channel their emotions in a healthy, non-violent manner: "I began to be able to release all the built up frustration, tension and anger inside" [Tom-L]. Rage and anger were seen as destructive to the self, a realisation that helped prisoners to 'distance' themselves from these strong emotions. Mastering one's emotions in such a way, gave prisoners control over these emotions without supressing them. This skill was found to be particularly valuable in an environment characterised by hyper masculine posturing (Jewkes, 2005) where tensions are high and relationships are often superficial (Crewe, 2009).

Enhanced emotional processing through yoga and meditation also affected the way prisoners

thought about their offense and sentence. It encouraged them to come to terms with their past crimes and their current circumstances: “Mentally it has helped me to be able to actually work through issues and problems and come to an acceptance of what’s happened and why I am here” [Bruno]. Gary explained that in the stillness of the yoga class he recognised the “bad choices” he had made and learned to take responsibility without “beating [himself] up about it”. Importantly, becoming ‘responsible’ was key to managing powerful emotions such as shame and guilt, while trying to find redemption; skills that are considered valuable for adjusting to a prison sentence (Crewe et al., 2016). Yoga then, perhaps similar to religious practices in prison, may have the potential to work as a “shame management and coping strategy” which assists prisoners in creating a pro-social identity and adopting a language of forgiveness (Maruna et al., 2006: 161). Most prisoners who had come to terms with their past offences stated that the self-control and insights gained through yoga led to both the desire and belief in their ability to prevent future reoffending: “I cannot undo my offences, but I can work to ensure my future is focused on a better and less selfish way of life.” [Hugo-L]. For others who maintained their innocence throughout the sentence, yoga provided some relief from their sense of procedural injustice.

Writing about long-term imprisonment Flanagan (1981:212) stated: “the element of time exacerbates all of the deprivations [of prison life] and transforms them ... into major problems of survival.” Loosing sovereignty over time, prisoners commonly experience it as a burden, which “they must learn how to discharge” (O’Donnell, 2014: 176). Although not all prisoners in this study were long-termers, it was clear that this was also a concern for most interviewees. They generally experienced time as “extremely slow”, but sometimes interspersed with rapid “bursts of intense pressure” [Igor]. Yoga and deep meditation worked in two ways to enable prisoners to distance themselves from the pressures of ‘institutional’ time.

Firstly, their practice could make the slow paced nature of prison life more tolerable. It enabled prisoners to reconstruct their subjective experience of time because, while practising, the sole way to mark time was through rhythmic breathing and time was perceived to “fly by” [Carl]. This mind-set was cultivated by the emphasis in yoga and meditation upon living fully in the present. This was a significant shift in thought for prisoners who had reported feeling trapped in their pasts, or inhabiting a kind of limbo state. Further, doing yoga was perceived as a constructive activity which “channels your mind into physically doing something with a purpose” [David] which helped to “cut through the boredom and isolation” [Frank-L]. Creating one’s own routine can provide a sense of agency, predictability and stability which can “speed time along” (O’Donnell 2014:200). For example, Gary, who incorporated yoga into his morning routine explained “it makes me

more positive, more active, looking forward to the day...I wake up and have a sorted programme...and then everything flies by and time goes quickly".

Secondly, on a different level, Igor explained that yoga could also "slow things down so that I can think about things more clearly" [Igor]. This was especially useful in times of tension and stress resulting from anticipation and uncertainty. Other prisoners explained that the acceptance gained through yoga alleviated the pains of "indeterminacy', 'psychological assessment' and 'self-government' (See Crewe, 2011). Prisoners expressed that the patience and tolerance gained from yoga helped them to navigate the unpredictability and confusion attached to the complexity of a seemingly arbitrary system (Crewe, 2011).

Relationship Building: Empathy and Compassion for Others

Most interviewees and many letter writers stated that yoga and meditation had led to improvements in their relationships, both inside and outside of prison. Improved communication with other prisoners was seen as a valuable survival tool, given the forced association and proximity with others, and where retreating from unwanted social interactions is difficult. The participants' improved relationships can be attributed to three main factors: enhanced emotional management skills, the development of empathy and finally, cultivating less judgmental attitudes. These changes in attitude are significant as they foster 'peace-making' and solidarity between prisoners and staff, benefiting the wider prison population.

Granted that some of the benefits of emotion regulation through yoga have already been examined, this skill, participants claimed could also help to improve relations. For example, prisoners were either "no longer angry with everybody" [Igor], partly because they were better able to manage their anger. Many prisoners experienced an increased desire for communication and connection: "I now like to be with people and talk to people...Whoever I talk to I get on with" [Gary]. As a result of their ability to exercise emotion control, prisoners were more tolerant of differences of opinion, and experienced less conflict: "Yoga has taught me to not bother...I still talk to them and can still be friendly but just avoid the subjects that you know you will disagree on" [Bruno].

While some participants experienced reductions in anger, others found that yoga also engendered powerful emotions such as compassion and empathy. They recalled proactively transferring "positive energy" [Paul-L] and projecting "loving thoughts" [Fred] towards others when practising yoga or meditation. Harry explained that his "shift towards the absolute commitment to love and kindness", led to a desire to help others which positively affected his relationships with fellow prisoners. Others also observed unexpected feelings of

love and compassion: “I have love for my surroundings, for other people and myself, of which I’ve never felt before.” [Arie-L]

Although homosocial bonding and “unspoken intimacies” do exist amongst male prisoners (Crewe, 2014:397), male identities are largely dictated by hegemonic masculine ideals in prison. In this context, demonstrations of sentimentality and affection may overstep parameters of male intimacy perceived as acceptable (Kiesling, 2005). Yoga then, may help to foster alternative and affectionate forms of behaviour that resist these prevailing norms of traditional masculinity. For example, Paul (L) expressed a newfound willingness to talk openly about “real feelings thoughts and emotions” which led to the development of closer friendships. Instead of acquiring respect through displays of physical strength and aggression, the act of bonding appeared to become a source of respect: “Being respected is really getting along with those around you” [Jordan-L]. Similarly, Tess (L) recognised that it was his compassion toward others that led “people to start to respect [him] more” which, in turn, allowed him to feel “mentally and physically strong”. Overall, many prisoners expressed experiencing deep gratification from performing altruistic acts. This is significant given the inherent degradations of the prison environment, where there are few constructive and benign opportunities to assert self-worth. Interestingly, these accounts of ‘generativity’ reflected common narratives of desisting offenders who wish to ‘do good’ and find a purpose in giving back to others and contributing to society (Crewe et al., forthcoming; Maruna, 2001; Irwin, 2009).

Often this newly discovered capacity for compassion prompted prisoners to understand the “ripple effects” of their crimes and feel remorse for victims, their family members and the community. Some connected their capacity to engage positively with others to yoga’s perceived effects on their ability to be less judgmental and “understand the suffering of others” [Kent]. At the centre of such compassion was *the recognition of similarity* and that “everybody has the capacity for goodness” [Eddie]. Prisoners reported being more likely to forgive others. In some cases this led to reconciliation with family members and other conflicts. The relationship also appeared to be reciprocal, as many prisoners reported receiving more “love from friends and family, even the prison officers. All the love I give out seems to be coming back in all directions” [Sardeep-L]. Relationship breakdowns are common in prison (Visher and O’Connell, 2012), which is especially concerning given the deterrent effects of social bonds (Laub, 1998). Therefore, by cultivating outside relationships and maintaining links with wider social world, prisoners can mitigate against the effects of the so called ‘civil death’ resulting from isolation (Goffman, 1968).

In some cases, the development of empathy was closely linked to the capacity to be compassionate towards the self, which yoga appeared to enhance: “I try not to be judgmental

towards others but I suppose it's about using it [meditation and yoga] to work out how I can start liking myself" [Eddie]. Others also became aware of the link between their inner peace and the quality of their 'outer' relationships: "The inner world is reflected on the outside. I've noticed that people respond to that. They know that you are at peace and they like it" [Theo]. Yoga, in many ways, appeared to harmonise the dissonance between the many layers of 'inner and outer' worlds prisoners find themselves in. For example, Kent described the effects of yoga as "an extension of the inner reality" to illustrate the integration of his external and internal worlds.

As alluded to above, prisoners' feelings of compassion were not only directed towards prisoners or relatives outside prison but also, in some cases, towards prison staff: "I feel like I can understand better how the staff in prison might be feeling...I come out of my self-absorbed bubble and want to share some of that peace with others" [Gareth – L]. This led to more positive interactions with prison officers. For example, Graham recounts his disbelief when "the grumpiest officer on the wing...smiled for once". It is noteworthy that staff-prisoner relationships are amongst the primary values contributing to a positive and safe prison experience both for staff as well as prisoners (Liebling, 2004). It was striking that the vast majority of prisoners who became more peaceful, explicitly referenced their improved relations with officers: "The lads in here and the officers are totally amazed by my serenity and to be honest, so am I" [Bill-L].

Most linked this burgeoning altruism, either directly or indirectly, to yoga and meditation. While some considered this a fundamental part of their personhood which yoga helped them reclaim—"practicing yoga and meditation made me see who I truly am: a kind, loving, happy person" [Rob]—others claimed that yoga had merely "highlighted" these attributes [David] and made them "more humble", "supportive" and "helpful" people [Jake]. These accounts are consistent with Maruna's notion of 'redemption scripts', which argues that desisting offenders reconstruct their self-narratives and revert to an "unspoilt identity" (Maruna 2001: 89), often highlighting an inherent goodness that is re-discovered. This chapter set-out to highlight the different ways in which yoga facilitated positive adaptation to prison life for those interviewed. However, the tools that enabled prisoners to find positivity in their daily routines and interactions could have broader implications for their lives as a whole. These broader, more holistic changes, will be considered in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Personal Growth and Transformation

According to ancient yogic philosophy yoga creates a balance between the inner reality and the world of external relationships and community (Rama, 1976). It is claimed that finding harmony and balance is found through connecting with the ‘‘all-pervading ‘Force’ or ‘Energy’ within the self (Rose 1998:13) which is said to bring about profound transformation and self-transcendence (Feuerstein, 2003:3). Cloninger (1994) persuasively argues that humans have a fundamental nature towards this ‘self-transcendence’. Indeed, deep personal change resulting from spiritual experiences has been widely documented (James, 1929). This chapter examines whether such profound changes could occur in the confines of prison. I begin by exploring how prisoners engaged with yoga’s spiritual dimensions, before returning to the subject of emotional control, focussing upon the agency gained from yogic practice.

Around half of the prisoners interviewed were reluctant to describe their yoga experiences as being ‘transformational’ or ‘spiritual’, although some did recognize this potential: “I wouldn’t say it was transformative but I would certainly say it’s the right direction” [Carl]. Many of those who took up yoga for physical reasons—who were initially uninterested in personal development or spirituality—reported that yoga and meditation led them to become more introspective or even spiritual. Moreover, some prisoners had spiritual experiences but questioned their validity and were reluctant to use the label ‘spiritual’, expressing concerns about the “mumbo jumbo and reputation of it” [Fred]. For some then, experiences of yoga seemed to be shaped by stereotypes, which may have been exacerbated by the hyper-masculine prison culture, with its inherent suspicion towards such experimentation.

While yoga can provide spiritual guidance for some, it appears equally beneficial for those disengaged with its spiritual dimensions. Notably, yoga as a vehicle for human flourishing was not dependent on identification or engagement with yogic philosophy or spirituality. Indeed, prisoners’ descriptions of self-improvement shared many similar ideas and characteristics, albeit using different vocabulary, regardless of any spiritual beliefs. Most interviewees who did not associate yoga with spirituality or transformation reported that it nevertheless instilled a greater degree of purpose, meaning and self-knowledge in their lives. They referred to profound experiences of self-actualisation and satisfaction gained from being ‘in the flow’ during yoga. Indeed, these accounts resonated with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1991) notion of ‘flow’, which are activities characterized by deep immersion and losing a sense of time. This process was experienced as a connection or “encounter with oneself” (Smith, 2007:40): an experience in which the perception of time and space is modified. The

connection to the body and fluidity of movement could act as a gateway to gaining spiritual awareness: “As I flex, bend, rise and fall, as my mind fills with wonderful words proclaiming a greater power and spiritual being, I am thrown away from my woes and misery.” [Ayla-L].

Many prisoners found that the spiritual or philosophical aspects of yoga offered a framework through which to understand deep existential questions. The ability to make sense of one’s experiences fulfilled the need for ‘meaning’ in prison. This is reminiscent of what Frankl called “tragic optimism”, the notion that even in the direst circumstances meaning can be found and suffering converted into accomplishment (2004:139). Similarly, O’ Donnell also referred to this as form of ideological sustenance or ‘spiritual rejuvenation’ (O’Donnell, 2014; 259). Such ‘reinterpretation’, or meaning making, not only had a significant impact on prisoners’ ability to endure prison life but allowed prisoners to flourish within it. Transformational experiences were most commonly expressed in terms of ‘the self’ and ‘the power’ within, which often took on spiritual dimensions: “I embarked on a journey into the world of yoga and meditation and of course the power of God. The journey has been one of self-discovery.” [Bill-L]. Prisoners often discovered a wealth of inner resources, which led them to feel “consumed by positive energy” [Simon-L] or “reborn” [Roger-L]. For example, Kent realized that despite living “in the poverty of humanity” it was possible to “utilize inner resources within” to transform his life. Finding meaning in suffering required acknowledging the tragic and devastating nature of imprisonment but turning inwards to discover possible sources of strength to overcome adversity, fear and powerlessness: “it is the mind that transforms...and illuminates cutting through all the afflictions, confusions, fear and when the mind is purified, it’s just clear, tranquil, light” [Kent].

Garbarino (1999:152) views “spiritual anchors” as an important foundation for the “path back from violence”, fulfilling a deep need for meaning. He considers these conditions necessary for long-term commitment to change, and the effectiveness of other programs. For many prisoners, turning inward enabled them to discover a greater purpose, which mitigated against feelings of solitude and insolation: “I feel I’m not alone and there is a way out of my loneliness” [Felix-L]. Developing this capacity to “love and understand the bigger picture”[Fabio-L] evoked feelings of interconnectedness or the revelation of a higher truth extending beyond individual selfhood. Insights related to justice, truth, morality, beauty, and the nature of humanity and the universe were often prevalent. This sense of ‘oneness with the universe’ [Fred] fostered transcendence of the physical world: “my soul is so flexible...so loving...tolerant even” [Rory-L]. Many testimonies were reminiscent of Maslow’s notion of ‘peak experiences’ which describe exceptional transformative moments—also referred to as a ‘glimpse of heaven’—that can invoke intense feelings of interconnectedness, revelation of a higher truth and awe (1970:75).

According to Griera (2016: 13), yoga enables prisoners to cross from one reality into another ''province of meaning''. She argues that this experience coincides with a feeling of 'shock', and prisoners in this study often described their experiences in terms of disbelief, shock and surprise. For example, prisoner described his newly discovered sense of inner peace as 'unreal' or 'magical' and others were perplexed by the 'amazing' ways in which the practice had transformed their lives. Indeed, as alluded to previously, prisoners were often lost for words to describe their experiences.

Some prisoners made use of language borrowed from holistic or spiritual sources such as 'karma' or 'energy' indicating the internalization of new concepts underpinned by Eastern ideas. This is also reflective of Griera's (2016) findings, that through yoga, prisoners gained a "spiritual stock of knowledge" or holistic concepts that offered a framework for prisoners to understand their own life path—and to place it in a meaningful narrative. Importantly, new belief systems can have a profound impact on the self but also provide practical (and moral) resources for coping with prison life. For example, some prisoners found that they could let go of materialistic desires and cravings. Sykes (1958:68) described how "material possessions are so large a part of the individual's conception of himself that to be stripped of them is to be attacked at the deepest layers of personality". Prisoners were not only able to tolerate these materialistic deprivations but found meaning in humility and simplicity.

Similarly, prisoners explained that yoga and meditation enabled them to be free from desire, cravings, false beliefs and aspirations that serve the ego, learning to "be content with what you have got and...wanting for nothing." [Harry] However, a critical approach to these apparent benefits could claim that this aspect of meditation and yoga may encourage passivity. For example, When Ron (L) spoke of shunning the "belief systems, the concepts and word associations" that he was attached to, this also including prison rehabilitative goals and ideals, such as self-improvement and future planning:

> *"Psychologists often ask me what my hopes for the future are, what my plans are etc? And when I reply that I don't have any plans and never think of the future, it baffles them. It's as if in their mind one can't exist or function without hopes and future plans. And when it comes to the concept of self, ego, I, we may as well be coming from different planets. Their entire science of mind revolves around the ego; the self is central, it is promoted, encouraged."* [Ron-L]

Indeed, several interviewees highlighted this tension between the values underpinning standard prison rehabilitation, and the potential for spiritual beliefs that challenged these expectations. Like Ron, others spoke of having no plans or tangible objectives for the future. Viewed through the lens of yogic philosophy, this apparent apathy becomes a commitment to

'go with the flow of life' and be fully open to the possibilities that present themselves along the way. Another prisoner spoke of his experience with a representative of the parole board, who misinterpreted his intention of 'letting go' as a negation of responsibility. During the interview he expressed frustration at her lack of understanding, stating that she would not be "so suspicious if she understood" [Harry]. The same prisoner also spoke of how meditation has helped him overcome the shame and guilt that tormented him for the crime he committed, a further cause for concern among the parole board, who interpreted this change of perspective as a lack of remorse.

The Importance of Experience

In his study of 'self-actualised' people, Maslow used the term 'being cognition' to capture the way in which they perceived the self and the world around them (Maslow 1959). Their cognition was 'holistic' and 'accepting', as opposed to evaluative. It is a form of knowing that results from an awareness based on perceptions, feelings and intuition rather than rationality or logical reasoning. Many prisoners who described interacting with and seeing the world in this way exhibited beliefs and behaviours that reflect Maslow's insights, emphasizing: wholeness, aliveness, effortlessness, truth and simplicity. The power of yoga as a catalyst for inner transformation lies partly in this shift in perception to *a more experiential quality of one's own behaviour, life and mind*. As Rucker (2005) suggests, yoga enables a form of conscious experience that "is not knowing about a habit; it is direct experience of the habit itself. Intellectual understanding is like thinking about food, where awareness is tasting it" (Nuernberger, 1996 as cited in Rucker 2005:109). This can have a profound impact on the depth, conviction and consistency of values because it generates a holistic form of knowledge which prisoners described as fundamentally pure. Igor described the insights gained through yoga and meditation as "direct experience" which "you can't really argue with", and it is something you are "more inclined to accept and build on".

Yoga's potential for self-transformation was attributed to the fact that it facilitates a deeply personal process that, once started "from within", evolves organically: "it is a journey from inside to outside, an extension of the inner reality" [Kent]. The emphasis on introspection creates the necessary space for personal development to emerge naturally, as a result of curiosity and self-inquiry. In contrast to other prison programmes that promote personal growth through direct intervention, yoga is non-prescriptive, allowing for the emergence of an individual's subjective 'truth'. As one prisoner expressed: "at first I was concerned that yoga was a sort of brainwashing, but when I actually did it I realised it is brain washing, but it's washing your own brain" [Carl]. Carl's comment illustrates the shift from passivity, to becoming an active and empowered agent. In contrast, passive agents exercise agency "solely in relation to the present moment and current circumstances, rather than assuming any

reflexive governance over the shape of their lives" (Archer 2012:250). This chapter now turns to examining how prisoners practising yoga may engage in 'internal dialogue', discover their 'ultimate concerns' and develop such agency.

Emotional Regulation, Self-Control and Agency

The prison experience can significantly heighten anxiety and lead to sense of losing control. Through the development of self-awareness, prisoners in this study were able to renegotiate their relationships with their emotions and felt equipped to exercise greater degrees of self-control. This involved living more fully in the present and developing a non-judgemental attitude.[14] By taking the role of the 'objective witness' prisoners could let go of obsessive thoughts and emotions. At times, this meant that prisoners learned to find value and 'comfort' in the chaos of their emotions, instead of dismissing or supressing them. Crucial to this process was achieving a 'stillness of the mind' that clarity regarding the transitory nature of emotional and mental states: "This practice has made me realise that suffering, craving, unsatisfactioness [sic], expectations and all possible states of mind or feelings arise, exist and pass away right here, inside my mind" [Fred-L]. The realisation of the apparently evanescent nature of suffering made it easier to move beyond the pains of imprisonment. Participants who reached this state appeared to be flourishing in prison, instead of enduring it. Developing a non-judgmental towards oneself allowed room for exploring one's habitual thinking patterns and pre-conceptions:

> *I accepted I had all this anger and hatred, and violent thoughts that I didn't particularly want. But because I'd been thinking a certain way for so long (and at times deliberately so) it had developed its own habitual energy. These thoughts came whether I liked them or not and the more I tried to get rid of them, the more they resisted.* [Ron-L.]

Most prisoners explained that their impulsive thoughts and behaviours had been replaced by a sense of freedom and choice: "Seeing or feeling that shift happen is itself exciting, a real high...before you might have felt trapped or limited, or uncomfortable" (Fahad– L). Jake expressed this in terms of increased 'mental flexibility', where strong beliefs could become less "rigid" and could be "swayed or changed". This mental liberation offered opportunities for rational thinking: "you can look at things in a calmer more realistic way and not blow the situation out of proportion" [Garry]. Importantly, prisoners learned to monitor how their emotional reactions unfold, reducing the spiral of negative thoughts and mastering the way

[14] The importance of non-judgemental attitudes and emotional processing has already been highlighted in this study findings, see chapter 5, but the aim here is to develop these themes in a different direction.

in which they express emotions. This level of self-knowledge was considered especially useful for reducing aggression, maintaining positive behaviour and making active decisions:

> *I have learnt to become more aware of how anger and other negative emotions arise, exist and dissipate. This awareness slows the process down...I can see anger developing, which allows me to have choice in how I respond (or not) to these feelings.* [George - L]

Prisoners came to realise that how they respond, mentally, emotionally and physically lies within their control. They explained that the bodily awareness gained through yoga was particularly valuable as it enabled them to recognise how anger manifests in the body: "you start grinding your teeth, the adrenaline might start going" [Jake].

While awakening to the freedom of this burgeoning sense of self-control and bodily awareness, participants also spoke of accepting their inability to control external circumstances: "Acceptance is the key...that gets the healing process going...acceptance is the water that douses the flames." (Ron – L) For Carl, acceptance facilitated a process of reassessment: "It lets me decide between what I can affect and what I can't affect, and that's very relaxing because you can put the things you can't affect to one side". It also entailed recognizing the limit of the prison's control over prisoners, as Kent put it: "They have the keys they have the power to unlock your cell. They will never have the key to your heart or to your mind." Interestingly, this form of acceptance was not passivity, or defeatism but framed in a more constructive manner by prisoners, who chose to make the most of their undesirable circumstances and saw the sentence as a "golden opportunity" [Rick-L].

This 'selective control' appeared to have increased participants' sense of agency. By controlling their behaviors in the present, prisoners could reimagine how they might succeed and excel in the future: "Yoga and meditation has given me the present...the here and now...the ambition and motivation, will and determination" (Cory –L). The transformative and deeply empowering potential of realising one's agency was evident in Bill's account about how, in the midst of feeling grief, devastation and upset as a result of missing his mother's funeral due to alleged mismanagement by prison staff, he was able to maintain his composure: "Never in my life have I had such power at my disposal. Never in my life have I been so proud of myself" [Bill-L]. For many prisoners this moment was an epiphany, allowing them to realise what lies within control, and accepting what cannot be changed.

These accounts bear resemblance to what Maybrick (1905:103) described as "the opiate of acquiescence" where "strength is found in surrender, in ceasing to resist". According to O'Donnell (2014:255) prisoners who master this process "create a bearable psychological environment where the tight confines within which they are forced to exist can be perceived

and felt differently". Indeed, the astonishing mental freedom exhibited by prisoners who do yoga stands in stark contrast to their physical confinement:

> *morning and night I escape my cell with my conscious mind, and I travel whenever I want, experiencing great intensities of emotion and wholesomeness beyond description, where I learn so much about myself and this wonderful world we live in that contains more than we could ever encompass in our short human lifetimes [Boris-L]*

Such mental freedom also created a safe space for prisoners to explore their emotions and reflect on painful issues without becoming distressed or embroiled in rumination. However, testing their emotional range was not a wholly positive experience for many participants. Allowing suppressed thoughts to resurface created a fear of "regression" into "dark fantasies" [Eddie]. Others recounted how repressed feelings and traumatic memories re-emerged in moments of stillness during yoga. One prisoner stated that, while helping him to manage tormenting thoughts and deviant fantasies, yoga was also a source of emotional pain, and intensified negative feelings such as fear, guilt and shame. However, most prisoners also experienced a greater degree of control over the intensity, depth and duration of explorations into the unconscious:

> *I can actually open the door a crack and take a look at some of that stuff, not for any extended period of time, whereas before I would have slammed the door as tight shut any way I could.* [Garry]

According to O'Donnell (2014:256), prisoners who have the ability to "withstand the rigours of self-examination" are able to gain "the fruits of introspection". Indeed, when confronting such unconscious material, it was common for participants to experience revelations about the driving forces behind their criminal behaviors, which helped them to gain perspective on their actions: "I managed to appreciate the importance of the insights I could get from my suffering." [Fabio-L]. Bringing the unconscious forward into the conscious allowed for self-integration and a profound sense of re-humanization: "I never would have faced and understood the rage that led to my offence or seen myself as a human being" [Cory-L]. Many claimed that to move on from their pasts, it was vital to face and understand these sources of pain residing in past behaviours.

Engaging with painful emotions and memories appeared to trigger a 'sense making' process by which past behaviour was re-evaluated and linked to the desired future self. Maruna emphasises that this re-working of the life narrative paves the foundation towards transformation and a future projected self (2001). The experience of control is significant because it empowers prisoners to rewrite their personal narratives by changing their

attitudes and beliefs towards the past, present and future. Further it has particular significance in prison where prisoners are stripped of autonomy over all "territories of the self" (Goffman, 1971:24). However, control over one's attitude becomes, "the last, if not the greatest" (Bettleheim:158) source of human freedom, for "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (Frankl, 2004:75).

While for some yoga and meditation involved confronting painful and negative emotions, for others it induced a state of bliss experiencing "a happiness beyond boundaries which cannot be contained in the prison I am in" [Boris – L]. In addition to providing valuable coping mechanisms, experiencing positive emotions has been found to "broaden one's awareness and encourage novel, varied and exploratory thoughts and actions (which build skills over time)" (Porporino 2013: 80). Although moments of escapism could risk leading to emotional avoidance, yoga appeared to highlight the dangers of, rather than lead to the numbing of emotions: "I started to do the yoga every morning...and instead of blocking out my feeling with exercise, drink and drugs...I learned to sit with my feelings, accept my feelings and I have gone from strength to strength" [Mike – L]. Indeed, for some letter writers and one interviewee, yoga enhanced self-expression (rather than suppression), and encouraged the pursuit of creative outlets, by channelling emotions into poetry and art.

It appeared that yoga started a process of self-examination that could spread to many areas of prisoners' lives precipitating a sense of vitality and willingness to actively engage in life: "I have developed a totally positive perspective on my health and future prospects" [Henry-L]. Interestingly, desisting offenders have been found to have especially optimistic outlooks on life (McAdams et al., 1997), often motivated by generative life goals (Maruna 2001). The vast majority of both interviewees and letter writers developed such an extraordinary sense of positivity, experiencing a lasting increase in energy levels, focus and motivation: "I felt refreshed, mindful and full of positive energy. My concentration has improved and I am able to complete tasks that would otherwise have been thrown to one side and forgotten about" [Rupert-L].

This restored vitality has often brought about a sudden source of determination and future-oriented thinking: "I think more and explore my present and future, all of my ambitions...I can't explain how strong my will and determination is" [Cory – L]. This was followed by increased capacity to adapt to one's circumstances and "take a positive out of a negative" [Pablo-L]. Similarly, some prisoners discovered talents and new opportunities, an awareness that they attributed to the effects of yoga. For example, Adrian (L) explained: *"the snow ball effect yoga and meditation has had on my new life is still rolling on and on. It has resulted*

in me reassessing my whole future and even getting a good job offer once my licence is over" [Adrian – L]

Finding the real 'me'

> *I work with making furniture. I can concentrate on a dirty rough piece of wood, saw it, plane it, sand it and eventually reveal a lovely smooth grained item. This is how I see myself. The yoga is what takes the roughness away and gives me tranquillity [Jeremy-L]*

According to Maruna, (2001) the process of desistence and construction of the desired-self often involves the rediscovery of one's underlying and hidden 'decency'. This sense of unveiling a concealed goodness echoes through the comments of participants, whose language consistently alluded to kinds of 'rediscovery'. Yoga provided the space and intimacy to connect with what was defined as the "inner self" and the opportunity to "find the real me" [Arnold-L]. Creating a positive sense of self counteracted the negative feelings of shame, self-hatred and suicidal thoughts and enabled prisoners to see beyond their criminal identity. Prisoners reported discovering their "true value" [Liam] and 'the good' in themselves "I can see who I truly am: a kind, loving and happy person." [Larry-L].

By accessing this perceived authentic self, prisoners were able to and gain an understanding of who they were. This triggered a profound sense of self-knowledge, completeness and in some cases even cultivated self-love: "I've learnt to love myself as the person I am, and I actually feel in tune with myself. I understand who I am" [Lisa-L]. The concept of genuine selfhood is central to yoga, and such 'authentic wisdom' of the Self is said to reside in the "realm of the inner world" (Griera, 2016:15). A similar notion is reflected in Taylor's concept of 'subjective turn', the idea that "being true to oneself" is the basis of life and humanity. (Taylor 1991:29).

The various transformations discussed in this chapter show the radical potential that yoga has to reorientation the lives of prisoners. In the final section, I attempt to set out the various implications, and limits, of these findings.

Chapter 7

Conclusion and Implications

Drawing together the prisoners' narratives, this section discusses the main findings of this study, the limitations of the research design, and the potential implications and avenues for further research. The effects of practising yoga are hard to quantify, especially given the different experiences and various benefits catalogued here. Indeed, it is difficult to identify whether improvements were a direct cause of yoga. While it may be difficult to establish an immediate causal link between yoga and personal transformations however, yoga nevertheless helped prisoners by reducing stress and alleviating the tendency to ruminate in prison.

The narratives shared here suggest that, to some extent, yoga had effects that went beyond coping strategies and enabled prisoners to flourish. It also helped to counteract the processes of so called 'self-mortification' which involves isolation, limited autonomy, dehumanisation, and loss of control (Goffman, 1961). Crucially, yoga appeared to create opportunities for recovering a sense of self through its positive impact on feelings of control and self-worth. The transformative nature of yoga is well illustrated in prisoners' narratives of discovering meaning and purpose. For some, this meant gaining self-awareness, self-control and a more positive outlook, while for others it provided a doorway to inner truth, self-transcendence and transformative moments of self-encounter.

Almost all prisoners were adamant that yoga had played a direct or significant role in their behavioural changes. Yoga appears to trigger internal mechanisms that are crucial for adapting to prison life, such as: self-acceptance, coming to terms with one's offence and sentence, and coping with institutional time. However, recent research suggests that prisoners, particularly those undertaking long-term sentences, naturally and gradually undergo an adaptive process (Crewe et al., 2016), experiencing "regenerative change pretty much on their own" (Irwin, 2009: 8). Further, Comfort (2008) argues that a process of 'self-inventory' could occur as a result of reflective time spent alone in the prison cell. Overall then, it is worth questioning whether many of the apparent effects of yoga were not directly related to its practice, but rather were enmeshed in a more organic process of adaption and transformation over time. Indeed, the fact that older prisons, who might have higher levels of maturity, were overrepresented in this study could support this interpretation.[15] However,

[15] As the age and sentence lengths of the letter writers were unknown this can neither help to confirm nor deny this interpretation.

the average sentence length of those interviewed was six years, and only one interviewee was a lifer. This may indicate that some of the pains of imprisonment commonly attributed primarily to long-term prisoners may also apply to those with shorter sentences and that, importantly, yoga may offer a powerful means of facilitating and accelerating the adaptive process.

It is important to acknowledge that there may be a degree of self-selective bias in operation in this study. Those choosing to practise yoga were perhaps more likely to possess a propensity for personal development. This effect may also be magnified in this sample, as only the most optimistic prisoners may have chosen to volunteer, or write letters to the Phoenix Trust. Nevertheless, the findings of this study retain validity for these specific individuals, and therefore in most prisons the benefits of yoga will be reaped, albeit by a specific group of individuals. Furthermore, the interview findings go some length to dispel the myth that yoga only attracts the spiritually-inclined or free-spirited. Indeed, most of the interviewees started yoga for reasons related to health and fitness but became aware of psychological, and in some cases, spiritual benefits during their practice.

It is worth questioning whether the apparent benefits discovering spirituality are contained to the prison environment alone. In their study of long-term prisoner adaptation Crewe et al. (2016:23) acknowledge that a "'holistically integrated life' organized around faith or personal idealism" may be advantageous to adaptation. However, drawing on the work of Archer (2003), Crewe et al. go on to warn against the presumption that it would be *equally beneficial* for prisoners' integration into society post release, suggesting that it could lead one to become a 'religious recluse' causing isolation and disappointment.

Yoga as a means of rehabilitation

> *...we cannot strengthen someone and violate their integrity at the same time...Blessing the life in someone usually requires a deep respect for their uniqueness, an openness to allowing them to uncover who they are rather than shaping them into who we want or need them to be.* (Remen, 2000: 218)

The non-intrusive and non-prescriptive nature of yoga means that it may offer a supplementary form of rehabilitation, which is less stigmatised and more accessible to those unsuited to typical forms of prison rehabilitation. Rehabilitation implies a form of treatment involving a "doer and a done to" or an "actor and a recipient", which is often experienced as coercive and can lead to resistance (Rucker, 2005:118). Many programmes focus on trying to 'fix' prisoners who are viewed as cognitively deficient, and facilitate moral rectitude and responsibilization through direct intervention, which prisoners may find too confrontational and disconnected from the reality of their lives (Kemshall, 2002; Laursen and Laws,

forthcoming). In contrast, yoga is "self-contained, self-borne, self-wrought" (Rucker 2005:118) and any change is fuelled by self-awareness. These aspects of yoga stand in sharp contrast to many forms of prisoner rehabilitation programmes.

Importantly, Norman emphasises the tension between "yoga's potential therapeutic benefits and its role as an agent of social control" (2015:93). While yoga may contribute to the reduction of problematic behaviour and thereby increase prison safety, placing the emphasis on rehabilitative behavioural change could detract from its primary benefits. For example, the release from constraint, which allows organic internal growth through uninhibited and "self-directed exploration" (Rucker, 2005: 118), might be jeopardised. Practitioners seeking to advocate wider adoption of therapeutic yoga in prisons would be wise to consider how these programmes are packaged and presented to prisoners.

Yoga's potential Role in the Process of Desistance

Although many prisoners expressed a willingness to engage in a more positive, constructive and less violent lifestyle, due to study design, the validity of these claims could not be tested. That is, it may be valuable to follow prisoners 'through the gate', to assess fully how yoga has contributed to their lives. Nevertheless, stated intentions are predictive of reoffending (Porporino 2010:72) and indicate an important first step towards desistance. Often, participants' conceptions of self-identity were founded on narratives of a 'desired future self'. These narratives emerged from observable increases in self-control reported by prisoners, which appeared to empower them to regain autonomy and to become the active narrators of their own lives (albeit within the restrictive confines of the institution). Their shifts in self-narrative, to a more positive self-image and sense of agency, may be crucial to life-trajectories, perhaps marking significant turning points in the life of an individual (McAdams, 1993).

The issue of individual human agency is worth returning to, given its centrality in desistance literature. Arguably, agentic factors play a greater role in the desistance process than structural factors (LeBel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001). Studies consistently show that a strong sense of agency assists in overcoming social disadvantage and thus achieving desistance (Schwartz et al, 2005). However, models of agency have lacked adequate explanation of "the structure and function of agentic cognitions or the mechanisms" according to which they function (Healy, 2013:4; Ward, 2000). Further, too much emphasis is placed on rational and cognitive functioning without considering the involvement of the emotions and feelings in generating agentic thoughts and behavior (Healy 2013; Côté and Levine, 2002). This study shows some of the ways in which yoga contributes to developing such agentic thoughts and actions.

Agency is defined by Matza (1964/1999: 28–29) as having "a sense of command over one's destiny", that is, a sense that actions have "internal rather than external causes". Interestingly, although individuals who reoffend often have high levels of social capital, they, in some cases, lack subjective resources, such as an optimistic outlook and a sense of purpose, in order to cope with adversities and social deprivation (Healy, 2012). It is possible that this stems from an overreliance on external instead of internal factors. For example, Liebling found that vulnerable individuals and those at higher risk of suicide in prison rely more on such "external sustaining resources" (Liebling 2012:10). Having strong internal resources means being able to tolerate misfortunes and the "shortcomings of a convectional life such as boredom". According to Shapland and Bottoms, this is not a passive act of surrender but part of "active maturation, indicating a capacity to find meaning and purpose in a constrained environment" (2011:227). It is this capacity for acceptance and agency, that prisoners reported gaining from yoga. Yogic practice strengthened their internal sense of control rather than relying upon the external resources, as many traditional rehabilitative schemes do. In analyzing the role of agency in desistance Côté (1997:563) stresses that those who adopt so called "default individualization pathways" allow external circumstances to govern their lives and do not feel in control of their futures, being unable to create or recognize opportunities for themselves. In contrast, by harnessing inner resources through yoga prisoners could stand upon solid foundations from which to embark on Côté's agentic pathway, which is founded on emotional stability allowing individuals to "explore their potentials and sustain some sense of direction and meaning" (Côté, 1997:577–578).

Implications and Discussion

Given the limited scope of this study, it is not appropriate to make policy recommendations. However, it is worth exploring some of the implications arising from this research.

Firstly, there appears to be a desire for activities and practices that address spiritual as well as emotional needs. Those who believed that such services were lacking in prison felt that yoga contributed to spiritual well-being. Secondly, practitioners of yoga become more aware of their emotions, or experience stronger, and perhaps more challenging, emotions. The process of self-exploration can be an emotionally overwhelming experience. As such, it may be necessary to combine yoga with more conventional talking therapies: prisoners who take part in yoga may require additional support to make sense of their experience and help them process traumatic memories.[16]

[16] This is, to an extent, achieved by the Prison Phoenix Trust as explained in the methodology section of this dissertation.

Yoga provides prisoners with a language that enables the construction of transformative narratives, either through spiritual means, or by other avenues of personal development. Grierra and Clott-Garrell (2015) argue that such transformative and spiritual narratives can "easily be conflated with the language of therapy or psychology" in the institutional structures of prison and are thus gaining legitimacy (153). However, according to some prisoners in this study, there remains suspicion—and an apparent lack of understanding—among both prison staff and practitioners in relation to prisoners' accounts of their spiritual beliefs. This may indicate that certain forms of personal development lack the legitimacy afforded to more conventional narratives. Yoga is one such challenge to traditional rehabilitative practices. The findings in this dissertation may indicate the need to reconceptualise prison risk assessment strategies, in order to facilitate more inclusive approaches to self-change. This short study began by speculating whether yoga could help to transform painful and harsh prison environments. While the design of this research makes it impossible to make broad claims that generalize to the wider prisoner population, the study participants nonetheless offered countless testimonies that yoga was a life-affirming experience with an array of transformational consequences.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Background Information

1. Name? Age? Location?

2. How long have you been in prison? How long do you have left?

Internal Process:

I am interested in how you experience yoga in prison. So can you tell me more about your experiences?

- Can you tell me about different ways it affects you:
  - Physically? (improve your health)
  - Mentally? (peace of mind)
  - Feelings and emotions?

  (i.e are there any physical sensations – what happens to your breathing/thoughts/feelings)?
- If I was witnessing your mind during yoga and meditation what would I see?

Emotional regulation:

1. Do you find that yoga has an effect on your well-being and mood? (Does yoga help you become more in touch with your emotions/help you regulate your emotions better?)
2. Some people have found that yoga can help them with their feelings of, shame, negative feelings particularly in relation to their past crimes. Can you relate to this?
3. Have their been any specific situations where yoga has helped you deal with your emotions? (e.g. anger, sadness, frustration)

Personal Transformation/Development:

4. Has yoga helped you change the way you think about your prison sentence?
5. Where there any significant turning points in your yoga experience?

- and how, if so, has this influenced the way you live your life? (eg relationships, conversations, postures, insight and realisation prompted by something linked to yoga or meditation)

6. Has yoga influenced who you are as a person? (e.g. self-understanding)
7. Does yoga influence the way you see or relate to your body?
8. Do you enjoy yoga in the moment or do you see long term benefits?
9. Has yoga helped you in other areas of your life? Or has it motivated you in any other way (e.g. academic/professional development/ or in the pursuit of any other goals?
10. Have you ever had a spiritual experience in connection with yoga or meditation?

Coping in Prison:

11. Has yoga/meditation ever helped you overcome difficult periods/events in your life?
12. Does yoga affect your behaviour?
    - Does yoga/meditation help you de-stress in particular and if so, how and when?
    - Have you become more focused or deliberate in interactions?
13. Has yoga affected the way you interact with others or had an effect on your relationships?
14. How do other prisoners relate to your yoga practice? (is it respected/stigmatized)
15. Do you find that yoga has helped you cope with your day to day experiences in prison?

Related to experience

16. Have there been any physical, mental or emotional barriers that make practising more difficult? (Any challenges to the practice of yoga)
17. Just tell me the first thing that comes into your head: What does yoga give you in three words? (E.g. reward, self-responsibility and hope)

Appendix 2: Consent form

The Meaning and Effects of Yoga in Prison

Conducted by Azra Karup, MPhil candidate in Criminological research, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

This project is supervised by Professor Alison Liebling, Director of the Prisons Research Centre, University of Cambridge.

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

	YES	NO
1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
2. My questions about the study have been answered satisfactorily and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal, and that I may decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
4. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
5. I am content to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
6. I am happy for the interview to be recorded and transcribed for research purposes.	☐	☐
7. I consent to the information collected (suitably anonymised so that I cannot be identified), being used for research purposes.	☐	☐

Participant's Signature:
_____ Date: _____

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Appendix 3: Information Sheet

The Meaning and Effects of Yoga in Prison

This research is being conducted is for the purpose of my MPhil dissertation in Criminological Research, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.

Yoga has been understood as a path to awakening and is often described as "one of the most comprehensive traditions of self-transformation" (Feuerstein, 1998). It is seen as a tool of human flourishing not only in Eastern traditions but also in the West with rapidly increasing numbers of followers (currently about 30 million). My research will focus on whether and how yoga can achieve such effects within the context of prisons. I aim to examine the effects of yoga on the physical and emotional well-being of prisoners focusing on the subjective and personal meaning of yoga for those who practice it. This will involve the exploration of concepts such as spirituality, the construction of time, emotional processing, discovery of purpose and reflexivity. Further, I aim to study gender related differences in relation to the experience of yoga between male and female prisoners.

I will ensure that the recorded interviews are uploaded onto a password protected laptop as soon as possible following the interview and then stored on an encrypted memory stick. I would also ensure that the interviews are deleted from the recording device and the laptop. Once the interviews have been transcribed, they will also only be stored on the encrypted memory stick. I would remove any identifiable data and use pseudonymous names when handling the data. Only I will have access to the memory stick as well as my laptop. My supervisor will only be privy to drafts and information that has already been anonymised.

Immediately after the interviews, the interviewees will be allocated a pseudonymous name. The identification key will be stored on a separate computer. I would make sure that any personal details with the potential of making individuals identifiable (such as names, exact age, offence details, nationality, origin etc.) will be changed so that the information included in the transcript is completely anonymous.

Material on hard copy will be shredded or disposed of in a confidential waste bin and electronic data will be deleted from the storage devices once no longer required

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