

# Prison Yoga Teachers' Newsletter



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From Selina, Sally and Victoria, Yoga Co-ordinators

Summer 2020

## Doing the Impossible!

By Ann, Elizabeth Fry Approved Premises



**U**p until March, weekly yoga classes had been running at the Elizabeth Fry women's bail hostel in Reading for three years.

The hostel (or approved premises) is south of the town centre and provides accommodation for up to 16 women, most of whom live there for up to three months. They are at the stage of re-establishing their lives and, within the

terms of their licence, they're encouraged to go out into the town centre to access public services, shop and generally rebuild their lives. Some residents hold down work placements or attend training.

A programme of project work within the hostel supports the rehabilitation process. Yoga is one of the regular activities on offer, and residents are gently encouraged to try it at least once. Classes are never large – four to six students typically – and because of the transient population, there is a continual refresh.

When the coronavirus lockdown came, all group activities were closed down. Although the hostel operates rather like a small boarding school, staff members do not live on site, so social distancing must be maintained at all times.

I contacted the hostel in early April, offering to teach yoga via Zoom, provided the staff considered it safe. This included not only being able to maintain distance during a group yoga session, but being sure that any safeguarding responsibilities would be met by hostel staff.

The hostel management were enthusiastic, and a trial session ran successfully with three students. We agreed to a weekly session. That initial success has not been replicated, and for three weeks now there have been no takers. The hostel population is currently lower than normal, and my contact told me that the regular group activity structure had fallen away due to social

distancing. Residents too had other concerns – they were experiencing more anxiety than usual about how they will find accommodation and a job, and how they can be in touch with their families.

But yesterday we agreed to hold the zoom sessions fortnightly, so the room can be used for other activities on alternate weeks, which may engage more residents. Staff shortages make it hard to run separate streams of activity concurrently.

Another strand of my approach was to record a lesson which could be followed – either in a group or individually – at any time. I have not been able to follow up whether this has been useful.

Some positive things have come from all this. First of all, the pilot lesson was successful and the students enjoyed it. It also gave me a chance to be in regular dialogue with my yoga contact, so I believe that yoga will re-start in the future. Finally, there may still be mileage in providing pre-recorded video lessons for residents who may prefer to practise yoga quietly on their own.

## Moving Forward While Sitting Still



By Selina

**L**ike you, those of us at the PPT office can't go into prison at the moment, but we have been gaining a glimpse of what it's like inside. Prisons have been reaching out to us in unprecedented numbers for ways to help them support those in their care. As a result of conversations with those prison staff, and from the letters we receive from prisoners, we have learnt:

- Prisoners are spending 23 and even 23 ½ hours in their cells a day.
- The hour, or just ½ hour they are out, can be very stressful. They need to shower, make their daily phone calls, and complete endless forms. Plus there are 'queues for everything'. Exercise in the yard, when not everyone adheres to social distancing, may only heighten anxiety.
- For some, their usual coping mechanism of taking part in activities – the gym, social activities, education, work, art or yoga classes – has been taken away. Being alone with their thoughts in their cells they may have flashbacks and feel distressed.
- Others are less anxious than before, feeling safer in their cells than with previous levels of social interaction and

The Prison Phoenix Trust encourages prisoners in their spiritual lives through meditation and yoga sensitively tailored to students' needs. We support prisoners and prison staff through teaching, workshops, correspondence, books and newsletters. We assist qualified yoga teachers in establishing and maintaining weekly classes in prisons, secure hospitals and hostels throughout the UK and Ireland. We offer training and ongoing support in person and over the phone.

activities. 'It's six of one, half a dozen of the other,' wrote one prisoner.

- A small but significant number are using this time like a retreat, spending time in meditation or prayer and practising yoga. Having recently moved prisons, a woman wrote to us about how she is managing as best as she can, thanks to the yoga teacher at her previous prison. "Breathing, stretching and physical poses are helping with the challenges of being in such a confined space day after day. Moving forward and staying positive, whilst sitting still."
- Prison newspaper *Inside Time* reported 'an unexpected surge in goodwill' towards staff. Some prisoners have broadened their Thursday night clapping to include officers.

### In-cell handouts

As prisons started to lock down, we received a request from a prison chaplain to use the yoga sequences featured in our prisoners' newsletter as in-cell handouts. In-cell (distraction) packs are commonly used in prison to help with mental health.

In its report "Life in Prisons: Living Conditions (2017)", HMIP (Inspectorate of Prisons) reported that: "Prisoners will sometimes spend a lot of time in their cells due to limited access to association or work; this may hinder their ability to cope with day-to-day prison life, leaving them vulnerable. It is therefore important that they have sufficient mental stimulation during periods of lock-up – a lack of which can lead to extreme stress, anger and frustration".

The packs may include quizzes, Sudoku, colouring and art and physical workouts. Most prisoners are given a choice, with many asking for yoga and meditation handouts. In response, we quickly developed a new secure area of our website where you can download sequences for your prisons, or share the link with them. We password protected it so we have a chance to find out when staff call, how things are in their prison, and also to remind them of the range of support we offer (free books, CDs, newsletter, radio programme, letter writing and of course resuming or starting weekly classes when the time is right). Please ask us for the password, if you haven't already.

### Books and CDs

We have had a surge in requests (88% more than average in April) for our free books and CDs. When a prisoner gets a stamp and envelope together themselves to send us our book request form (rather than a staff member posting us a batch of forms they've collected), our charity's limited resources are more likely to go to people who genuinely want them. So we request that – in general – prisoners send us the completed form themselves. (Of course, there are exceptional circumstances which we leave to the discretion of prison staff, e.g. if someone struggles with literacy or is put off by the cost of sending the form from Ireland, then we are happy for things to be done differently.) Please let your prison know the process. We respond to each request with a parcel which includes a personalised letter offering on-going support from a listening, reflective letter writer. Many prisoners stay in touch this way for years, and even on release.

### Teacher network

As part of a prison yoga teacher network, you are playing a critical role in the effort to extend support far and wide, by offering help for your prison(s) or secure institution, even though most of you can't go in at the moment. We were reminded by former prisoner Mike at our training event in March the



**An in-cell pack from HMP Warren Hill where PPT handouts are now included**

importance of continuity. By keeping in touch with your prisons you are providing that all-important ongoing support, offering your own or our meditation and yoga handouts. Your offerings will also make it more likely your classes will resume when they open their doors to external services again.

### Remote resources

As we write this, there is no end in sight to lockdown in prisons. We are told new ideas for in-cell practice are welcomed. Staff select different things to suit those in their care and need to keep coming up with new material as days and months go on. We've added some new handouts to our website. This will provide an opportunity for you to be back in touch with your prison, if you wish.

You can also remind them of the PPT's yoga and meditation session *Freedom Inside* on National Prison Radio (airing 3x / week in prisons in England and Wales) – broadcast times are in the prison newspaper *Inside Time*.

### New opportunities

Some prisons not recently running yoga classes have been in touch seeking ways to help prisoners during this time through yoga. We are excited for the new opportunities this brings and to be back running workshops with you and establishing new classes. Approved Premises (APs), where prisoners may go as an interim measure on release, are increasingly interested in yoga classes. Our June training will explore this sector and how to get classes going in your local AP.

### On-line teacher training

After a successful virtual gathering in March, we held another on-line training in early June and will continue to run virtual events. Please look out for emails and details in this newsletter about these ways to learn about new opportunities and gain support from each other.

### Together in Meditation

The sacred silence of meditation is a vital part of our work. Please join us for 25 minutes of silent breath-based meditation on Tuesday mornings at 8.30 via Zoom. Contact us for joining instructions.

There is a great deal of appreciation from prison staff for the support being offered. One person wrote, "This is brilliant! There has been quite a demand for yoga so once this lockdown is over it would be great to see if we can get something going."



Another said, "Many thanks for your hard work. I hope that once the current circumstances are alleviated, we can continue to work together."

## Finding Our Feet

By Sedge, PE Instructor, HMP Eastwood Park



Our working day in the gym of this women's prison changed dramatically after Boris' lockdown announcement in March. In a day we went from business as usual to effectively working in an office. After finding our feet and figuring out how to best continue our work in these challenging times, we got ourselves back out there.

The main difference has been the change in social interaction. As instructors we teach every day. We encourage, empower and try to overcome obstacles to women doing exercise. We still do that now, but we have to do it in a different way and in a different setting.

A typical day now starts with us catching up on what info has come back from the previous day's visits and interactions. Are any women asking us for anything specific? Do any of the wings want more of the hand-outs we have given out previously? Have any staff been asked for anything that sits with us (workouts, yoga, general exercise help)?

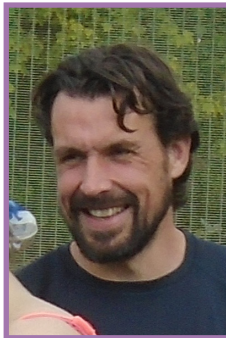
We then get ourselves onto the wings and the exercise areas and speak to the women and staff. This interaction was a little unusual for us and the women at first, but we've all become used to it now.

Questions are about how to perform some of the exercises on the various work out sheets. Specific information about how to exercise a certain body part, normally bums and upper arms and questions on yoga, meditation and relaxation.

The session sheets that the PPT put together are proving very popular. We have handed round three of them so far and we always get asked questions about them. In fact all the PPT stuff has been popular and we sent the PPT office a great number of book request forms.

Our working day is pretty far removed from what we did before. We are trying to keep the women motivated to exercise whilst they are locked in for long periods of the day. This is tough and harder than having enthusiastic women turn up at the gym for a session. It has presented us with some barriers that can be problematic to overcome, but we are trying our best.

We are very grateful for all the support from our yoga teacher Sally and the Prison Phoenix Trust. The yoga and meditation handouts complement our chats with the women and enable us to provide well rounded holistic interactions every time.



**The man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones.**

~ Confucius

## Looking beyond bravado: Insights from PPT training day

by Susie, HMPs Channings Wood and Dartmoor

Every year, The Prison Phoenix Trust hosts a training day in Oxford for yoga teachers working in prisons and secure institutions. I really value the days and travel from Devon to attend. It's a chance to get together and share ideas with other teachers and hear from a couple of expert and inspiring speakers.

So as coronavirus locked us down, instead of meeting in Oxford we met virtually via Zoom. With guest speakers Dr. Coretta Phillips and ex-prisoner Mike, it was a special, interesting and informative meeting.

Coretta, senior lecturer at the London School of Economics talked about race in prisons. It made uncomfortable listening but it's important to know where we're at as a nation on this issue. She explained that while BME groups make up 13% of the general population, they comprise 27% of the prison population. To explain this Coretta divided her talk between discussing racism in the community and the experience of BME prisoners.

One aspect of Coretta's research tells us that racism in the community is linked to discrimination in the workplace. We know that employment is a useful measure of social and economic integration but studies show that university graduates from BME backgrounds have to make 50% more applications for jobs than their white counterparts and that unemployment has a high correlation with crime.

Coretta also talked about discrimination by the police, the justice system and the 'white gaze'. This refers to 'reading the surface' of black bodies as dangerous and it subtly affects a person's racial or cultural self-identity, often leading to depression and trauma.

Highlighting her research findings Coretta described the experience of racism inside prison. BME prisoners describe a culture of mistrust and aggression, forcing them to wear a mask of bravado in order to cope. She also gave real examples of routine and humiliating discrimination experienced by minority groups. It was helpful to be reminded of the extra stresses BME



Coretta discussing racism

prisoners have to deal with.

Ending on a positive note, Coretta said that for a small number of people, imprisonment offers some respite and opportunities for personal growth that chimes with our work as yoga teachers.

Next we heard from Mike, an ex-prisoner, who told us that he may have been one of the wealthiest people on the Channel Islands but on imprisonment he lost everything and chose to re-evaluate what really matters in life. He found adjusting to life

inside challenging and signed up to yoga classes as a way to kill time. Prayer and running also helped him, but after a while he quit yoga, rejoining later with more commitment.

Mike found that yoga helped him cope in prison (and heal an

injured foot). Now released, he still attends classes on the out. Mike emphasised the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual value he gained from yoga in prison. So much so that he is now training to run the London marathon, raising money for the PPT.

For me both speakers reinforced the power of yoga and the importance of our work in a context that has so much diversity. Yoga is about the connection of us all – in MP Jo Cox's words, 'We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.' Our classes offer a chance for prisoners to experience a culture of respect, non judgment and to discover their true selves. We know this because the prisoners tell us. I feel privileged to be involved in this work which celebrates the connection between us all.



**“If you light a lamp for someone else  
it will also brighten your path.”**

*~ the Buddha*

## Training for Teachers

### Listening In!

*30<sup>th</sup> June 2020, 7.30 – 8.45 pm, on-line, by donation*

Not technically a training event, this evening may nonetheless inspire you. Join us if you can as we celebrate our latest radio programme for people in prison. Penny Boreham (radio producer and PPT Trustee) will be in conversation with four former prisoners who contributed to the latest version of Freedom Inside, a 12-part series now on National Prison Radio. All twelve yoga and meditation sessions start with different dialogues between former prisoners and people currently serving time, about how meditation and yoga help them transform hopelessness into hope, and find strength for everything life presents. We're delighted that people in prison are able to hear these powerful exchanges, and we want to share some of them with friends and supporters. On the evening, we'll hear several short clips from the programme. The panel will respond to these with fresh thoughts and to audience input too.

**Please register and book at [pptprisonradio.eventbrite.com](https://pptprisonradio.eventbrite.com)**

### Autumn Meditation Day for Yoga Teachers and Letter Writers

*Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> October, 10 am – 4.00 pm, on-line, £10*

**Our annual retreat was scheduled for 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> October as a physical gathering, but the retreat venue has closed for 2020, and there are challenges in booking another, and uncertainty about whether we'd be able to gather in person.**

This day, held mostly in silence, offers a chance to deepen your own meditation practice so you feel more confident in offering it as part of your teaching. A talk on the practice, a chance to meet one-on-one with the facilitators and an asana practice before lunch will provide the support you need. Your home needn't be totally silent like a retreat centre on the day. We'd rather you welcome the realities of what's happening domestically and weave them into the practice, rather than seeing them as obstacles. We hope you can join us. Teachers working in prison until recently, or those offering cover or about to start will be given priority.

### An Introduction to Teaching Yoga in Prison

*Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2020, Wytham Village Hall, Oxford, £35*

Is it possible to give unconditional support, affirmation and encouragement through yoga and meditation in a highly regulated, stressful setting like prison? Come find out more on this day, when we will explore the challenges and rich rewards of sharing yoga and meditation with prisoners, ex-prisoners and staff. Open to teachers interested in finding out about prison yoga teaching.

**This event will happen if COVID-19 conditions change to a degree where we can gather safely. We will postpone nearer the time, or hold it on-line if there is even a small health risk.**

**For more information or to book your place on the meditation or introduction days,  
please get in touch with Laura - [laura@thepppt.org.uk](mailto:laura@thepppt.org.uk)**