

Prison Yoga: A Path for Healing and Recovery *An Interview with James Fox, MA*



James Fox, MA, is the founder and director of the Prison Yoga Project and a certified Hatha Yoga instructor with more than 20 years of experience. He has offered yoga classes at San Quentin State Prison since 2002 and has been involved in offender accountability, violence prevention, and emotional literacy work with prisoners. He has taught yoga and mindfulness practices to at-risk youth in juvenile detention and other settings and created a yoga curriculum for the Peacebuilders Initiative, held annually in Chicago. James brought his Prison Yoga teacher trainings to several U.S. cities and Norway in 2011.

SS: Teaching in prison obviously entails a lot more than just knowing how to lead an *asana* class. How did you prepare for this role?

JF: My journey began back in the 1980s with mindfulness retreats with Stephen and Ondrea Levine. Between 1987 and 1989, I trained with the Living Dying Project to assist people who had a life-threatening illness and provide compassionate support for their caregivers. I also began my Hatha Yoga studies during this time. For 13 years, I practiced regularly and went on various retreats and intensives—mostly Iyengar and Ashtanga Yoga. By the late 1990s, I wanted to teach to give back from all the physical, emotional, and psychological benefits that I had experienced from my own practice, but I knew it wouldn't be in a conventional yoga studio setting. I took my first yoga teacher training with Erich Schiffmann in 2000. I began teaching in a residential center for young boys who had suffered abuse and neglect. Doors soon started opening to work with at-risk youth using mindfulness techniques to help heal their emotions through teaching them to focus on sensations in their bodies.

I took violence prevention and conflict resolution trainings. To me, emotional literacy is all about correlating bodily sensations with emotions, so it made sense that yoga has tremendous potential for transformation. One of my most impactful trainings was with a Catholic priest and senior Iyengar Yoga trainer from India, Father Joe Pereira, whose Kripa Foundation works with people who are recovering from addictions. Yoga and centering prayer, a kind of Christian mindful meditation, are his main techniques. I learned Father Joe's treatment protocol for overcoming addictions.

I also incorporated Taoist Yoga into my teaching. It brings a martial arts feel that resonates with my San Quentin students. Many have heard of *chi* and virtually all know the *yin/yang* symbol, so it's easy to discuss the movement of energy and life force with them. In the new edition of my book [see below] I include a whole warrior practice.

I also use tools from the Desikachar style of Viniyoga, which is similar to Taoist practices in how the movements are very intentional and repetitive. In particular, there's a set of Viniyoga warrior poses that I appreciate. Using this flow to coordinate movement with breath sometimes clicks beautifully with people who have become dissociated from their bodies.

What advice do you have for a yoga teacher who wants to work therapeutically with an incarcerated population?

You need to get educated about how to effectively approach a facili-

ty to volunteer; what you'll encounter emotionally and politically on the inside; and how to gear a class toward mental disorders, violence, and recovery.

You have to shift into institutional thinking, always remembering that you're operating in prison. An example of working within a rigid system is that my afternoon classes happen during what is called an outcount period, which is when everybody has to be accounted for (three times a day). I carefully fill out a form with the guys' identification numbers. If one of the hundreds of prisoners throughout the institution isn't accounted for, then the count doesn't clear. It usually clears between 4:30 pm and 5:00 pm and then there can be movement again. My class ends around 4:45, but I can't go anywhere if the count hasn't cleared. I've been there until 7:30 in the evening.

You must be able to stay grounded while holding the space for the students to go inward and deeply connect within themselves. When they cross the threshold into the yoga classroom, they can leave prison for the 90 minutes we are together. I'm very protective of that space and ensure that it's maintained through my teaching and presence. Once I had to break up an argument between two guys right after we ended practice. I stepped in and stated emphatically, "Take it out on the yard. Not in my yoga class!"

Going into a prison setting doesn't necessitate being a therapist, but you need to have a clear understanding of the psychological issues that most students are dealing with. You have an opportunity to apply the practice of yoga to those issues. That's what I'm most interested in: teaching yoga as a path for healing and recovery.

How do you skillfully gear your classes to address these emotional and psychological issues?

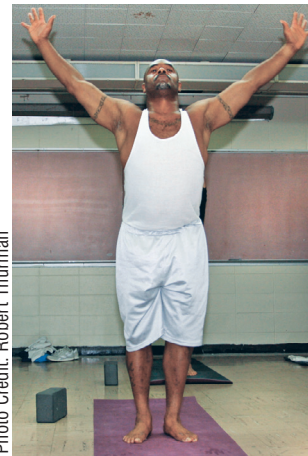


Photo Credit: Robert Thurman

It's important to take a mindfulness approach—training students to discipline their minds to observe what's happening in the present moment and stay with the sensations in the body and the breath without drifting off and disconnecting. This kind of awareness needs to be practically reinforced, not just in sitting meditation, but by modeling and leading students into moments of silence to deeply reflect. For instance, I may take a full minute in *surya namaskar* [sun salutation] to do a mindfulness practice while the students stay in *tadasana* [mountain pose]. They're flowing and then I purposely inter-

rupt and encourage them to reconnect with what we're really practicing—integration of mind, heart, and body. This inner strength is what they can nurture and apply to those frequent moments of unpredictability and chaos in their daily lives. I remind them that they are developing the ability to stay present and aware in the moment, so they can consciously respond to situations rather than react.

I speak directly to issues of addiction and violence, saying things like, "Your breathing practice can help you deal with your recovery and manage the discomfort that arises. Yoga can help you gain control over your impulses when you want to use." We also talk about depression because it's such a common mental health issue.

Most prisoners have come from traumatic circumstances and

Prisoners are often in shock when they're dumped back out in societyCultivating awareness is the most practical and healthiest tool for these guys to self-soothe.

Photo Credit: Sean Donnelly



still carry that load, consciously or unconsciously. The central issues around trauma are unpredictability and feeling a lack of control. That's their everyday world in prison! It's difficult to turn off the amygdala switch of the fight-or-flight response.

How do you introduce new students to yoga?

I make sure to explain that this ancient practice is much more than just stretching and exercise. Yoga is union. With mind, body, and heart integrated, you naturally open to understanding that deepest part of yourself.

I always begin practice with a centering meditation. Dropping into this grounded place is a relief from the chaos of life in prison, where they are subjected daily to a lack of control, predictability, and safety. Being able to sit and consciously breathe is a whole new experience psychologically and physiologically.

Yoga class is very intimate compared to the armoring, social hierarchies, and race segregation they deal with every day. They're forced to socialize with only a small demographic of other inmates. Even showering is segregated by race. But all races are there together in my class. Most people wouldn't think much about baring their feet in a yoga studio, but that exposure is a huge vulnerability in prison.

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We create *sangha* [community] with a shared new value system. It's radical. I get to stress what's really important when we're together. If I'm true to the teachings, it all takes care of itself. They experience union within themselves and with each other.

Evidence shows that yoga can heal trauma and reduce recidivism. Could you speak to what you've seen with your students?

There has been more research so far about the benefits of yoga for veterans with PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] but I think it also largely applies to the incarcerated population. I've seen many parallels between vets with PTSD and the prisoners I've been working with for the last decade. Many vets get diagnosed with nonfunctioning PTSD. I'd say most prisoners are on a PTSD simmer.

I can give you a great example of how some students take their yoga training to heart. In fact, I can let a student say it in his own words. Paul is a former San Quentin student who was transferred to another California state prison but still stays in touch. He has been teaching yoga classes there. I recommend books and he devours them—he's read the Sutras and commentaries on the Sutras. It's

amazing! Sadly, about 60 percent of released prisoners return to prison within three years. Paul recently wrote some powerful words about the struggle underlying that high recidivism rate:

"My own observations as a non-combat vet and a state prisoner.... Coming home from a military deployment or prison term is complicated. Upon my own release from prison following my last five-year term, I was bombarded by impulses, ideas, and emotions that strongly influenced my attitude and behavior. Simply put, after the novelty of being home wears off (for me, about two to three months), we all get engaged in the rat race that leads to the means of our survival. What happens? How did we survive on the yard in prison? How did we survive in combat? We were trained to adapt to those circumstances. Now we need to be retrained to adapt to society or it's like being dumped cold in a war zone for the first time, feeling constantly on edge or hyper-alert, being distracted by recurring thoughts, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, facing a lot of anger, feeling a lot of anger. The paradox is that these reactions, which most doctors and parole officers label 'mental symptoms' or 'habitual criminal behavior,' are adaptive physiological responses that we have to survive or the things we do to suppress the discomfort. To us, they're normal behaviors. Without them, we would be abnormal and at risk in our temporary prison environment. Despite the differences between prisoners and combat vets, I can't help but notice the similarities."

Prisoners are often in shock when they're dumped back out in society. Imagine trying to function with a chronically hyper-alert nervous system! Cultivating awareness is the most practical and healthiest tool for these guys to self-soothe.

What is your vision for the Prison Yoga Project?

Our mission is to spread mindfulness yoga and meditation to prisons worldwide. Yoga can inspire a prisoner to actively take on his own healing and not wait for the government or prison system.

A colleague and I are introducing mindfulness programs to several state prisons near the [San Francisco] Bay Area. I want to train yoga teachers and establish PYP chapters in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles to connect with prisons and different drug rehab and re-entry programs. I want to provide scholarships for a select few prisoners I work with who show promise in becoming yoga teachers themselves.

With the increasing evidence-based support of how yoga and meditation can effectively address anxiety disorders, impulsive behavior, and aid in addiction recovery, it's an opportune time to advocate for these practices for prisoner rehabilitation. With economic hardships facing federal and state budgets, we have a practical and cost-effective way of providing programs for the incarcerated. It's an honor and privilege to bring healing where it is so dramatically needed. **YTT**

James' book, *Yoga: A Path for Healing and Recovery*, is a practical instruction manual that contains the basics of yogic philosophy, breathing instructions to calm the nervous system, and many pages of illustrated postures and artwork by San Quentin students. Purchasing the book will also ship a free copy to a prisoner that has requested it. (More information can be found at www.prisonyoga.com.)

Next PYP Teacher Training: Los Angeles, March 17-18, 2012 (www.prisonyoga.com/training).



Stephanie Shorter, PhD, is a writer and yoga researcher. She is on the board of directors for Community Yoga, which brings yoga to correctional facilities and the county sheriff's office in Austin, Texas.