

Epoch Times - Prison Yoga - Is Meditation the Cure for Recidivism

By Amelia Pang, Epoch Times

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After serving 17 years for armed robbery, Adam Verdoux, 45, moved into transitional housing. Not long after his release, a burly housemate challenged him to a fight. Feelings of masculinity, pride, survival, rose then dissipated. Verdoux knows how to disengage from heated situations: he meditates three times a week.

“I told him I’ve been trying to learn how to resolve issues without the use of violence,” Verdoux said. “I would try to work through it with him positively.”

It’s been two years since Verdoux was released. He is taking six classes at the Institute For Principle Studies in California, and plans to get a master’s in public administration.

He’s come a long way since his armed robbery spree—when, he was 26 and he wanted to die. Suicide by cop was the plan.

To his disappointment at the time, the police let him live. After 11 years behind bars, including 4 and a half years in solitary confinement, Verdoux was released. He took a trip to California for a music festival but ended up robbing a Bank of America instead. He returned to prison for another six years.

It was at San Quentin State Prison in California that Verdoux took a class with James Fox, the founder of Prison Yoga Project, and a switch flipped in his mind.

“Yoga really allowed me to work on core issues,” Verdoux said. “It played a huge part in my change. It really facilitated that process.”

There are various rehabilitative programs in U.S. prisons such as education, therapy, and drug treatment. But during a time when the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 76.6 percent of released prisoners are rearrested within five years, a number of correctional facilities are considering incorporating yoga as well.

Prison Yoga Project

Ever since the popularity of Transcendental Meditation (TM) in the '70s, there’s been a burgeoning grassroots initiative to teach yoga and meditation in prisons across the United States. Although TM was the first type of meditation taught in U.S. prisons, a variety of different kinds of yoga and meditation are taught in prisons today. Most don’t have an affiliation with a religion or a lineage.

For decades, science journals have documented how meditation can help reduce recidivism. Research shows that yoga and meditation can improve mood, impulse control, concentration, and decision-making skills.

The Prison Yoga Project, founded in 2002, was the first large-scale prison yoga organization of its kind. It has trained more than 1,200 volunteer prison yoga teachers in the United States, Mexico, Germany, Norway, and the Netherlands.

Most of Fox's incarcerated students in California are serving a life sentence with a possibility of parole; most were charged with murder.

"I've never felt threatened," Fox said. "I make it very clear we're here to create a higher consciousness. If that's not something they're interested in they won't stay. I end up with good guys."

Apparently there is a high demand for a higher consciousness.

There is a one-year wait list for yoga classes at San Quentin, one of the largest prisons in the nation.

More than 15,000 inmates have requested yoga guidebooks about the philosophical aspects of yoga, such as how to deal with trauma and how to resolve problems with non-violence.

The Prison Yoga Project has mailed more than 15,000 copies of its yoga guidebook to inmates free of charge. (The organization survives on small grants and teacher training fees).

Fox's class consist of traditional yoga, meditation, conscious breathing, relaxation, and some basic movements. Since it's tailored for the prison population, it differs from public yoga classes, which are predominately movement-based.

The end goal is for incarcerated men and women to continue peaceful meditation after their release.

"The odds of them enrolling into a yoga studio is very little. They have to find jobs, a place to live, rebuild their lives, reunite with family. Prison yoga is focused on giving them the tools to meditate on their own after leaving," Fox said. "The greatest feedback I get from people is not about a particular pose they mastered, but that they can disengage from a potential conflict based on what they learned from meditation."

A study by the National Council on Crime & Delinquency in 2012 found that prisoners who learned yoga at San Quentin were better able to "disengage from negative impulses."

Other studies have documented that meditation can help incarcerated people recover from drug addiction.

A 1987 study tracked 259 parolees who had learned Transcendental Meditation at San Quentin. It found that 60 percent of parolees who meditated were still clean after two years, compared to 45 percent of parolees who did not meditate.

The study, published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, also found that the recidivism rate of meditators was 35 percent to 40 percent lower than former convicts who had received merely prison education, vocational training, or psychotherapy but no meditation classes.

“Career criminals are often psychologically incapable of processing a complex world, so they revert to drugs and alcohol when they can’t understand uncertainty,” said Trip Levine, a programmer in New York who periodically teaches yoga in prisons. “Yoga provides a context for their lives. It can cognitively enable them to understand uncertainty.”

“People call imprisonment justice, but all they’re doing is removing the problem. They’re not fixing the problem,” Levin said. “Rehabilitative justice is the whole concept behind prison yoga.”

In many cases, teaching in prisons is deeply therapeutic for yoga instructors too.

From Sex Trafficking Victim to Prison Yoga Teacher

Anneke Lucas, 52, is the founder of Liberation Prison Yoga, a non-profit prison yoga organization in New York. One can’t tell from her gentle demeanor that her mother used to sell her to a pedophile ring in Belgium.

From age 5 to 11, Lucas was raped by hundreds of men. It was an infamous ring, where the notorious child killer Marc Dutroux once worked.

After Lucas was rescued, she moved to New York and gradually recovered from her trauma by practicing yoga and meditation.

Over the years, she found herself becoming interested in prison yoga. Although, when Lucas entered a prison to teach yoga for the first time, she wondered if her trauma would be triggered if she saw murderers and pedophiles like the ones from her childhood.

“In prisons, I expected to find the scary people I grew up with,” she said.

Instead, she saw battered humans.

There was often a painful story leading to crime. She came across people who have been abused and neglected as children and people who have been victims of sexual violence.

“I found people who have been traumatized like myself but they haven’t had the privilege to heal for 15 years like I did,” Lucas said. “To be able to share that healing makes me feel really useful.”

Lucas currently runs 30 programs in multiple correctional facilities in New York, including Rikers Island. Her programs also include discussion and writing.

Impact of Meditation Varies

Researchers have noted that meditation can have an adverse effect if certain people take up a type of meditation that is not suitable for them.

“Meditation, for all its de-stressing and self-development potential, can take you deeper into the darkest recesses of your own mind than you may have wished for,” Oxford researcher Miguel Farias wrote in his book “The Buddha Pill: Can Meditation Change You?”

The book cited a 1976 report by Arnold Lazarus, a pioneer of cognitive behavioral therapy, which found that “researchers and therapists need to know both the benefits and the risks of meditation for different kinds of people.”

How do prison yoga teachers grapple with this issue? They try their best to work with the available science.

Sarahjoy Marsh, the founder of a nonprofit yoga studio in Portland called the Daya Foundation, has been teaching yoga in prisons for 20 years.

She works closely with her husband, Jay Gregory, a clinical psychologist, to make sure various inmates are learning meditations that are suitable for them.

For instance, if an inmate has schizophrenia, Marsh would not teach them to meditate in silence.

“We won’t teach them isolating meditation where their voices are overpowering,” Marsh said. “We’d teach them eyes-open meditation, body centered-meditation.”

“It’s not random,” she said. “We’re teaching according to the brain.”

Certifying Prisoners as Yoga Instructors

Although Prison Yoga Project has trained over 1,200 volunteer instructors, Fox estimates only around 350 are currently teaching on a regular basis in the U.S.

There is a shortage of teachers to meet the demands of prisons. Some organizations are beginning to train incarcerated men and women to become teachers.

In March, 20 incarcerated women at a Maryland state prison will begin a 200-hour training accredited by Yoga Alliance, the official organization that sets the standard for professional yoga teaching certifications.

“The idea is for them to be able to carry on the program when they’re incarcerated,” Fox said. “They will also have jobs after they leave prison.”

The Oregon Department of Corrections requested a similar program for its prisoners with developmental disabilities.

In response to its request, the Daya Foundation began training 12 prisoners with developmental disabilities to become certified yoga instructors in August. The inmates will complete their training—which includes education on neuroscience—in the first week of March.

Four of the developmentally-delayed prisoners are expected to be released soon and will have employable skills.