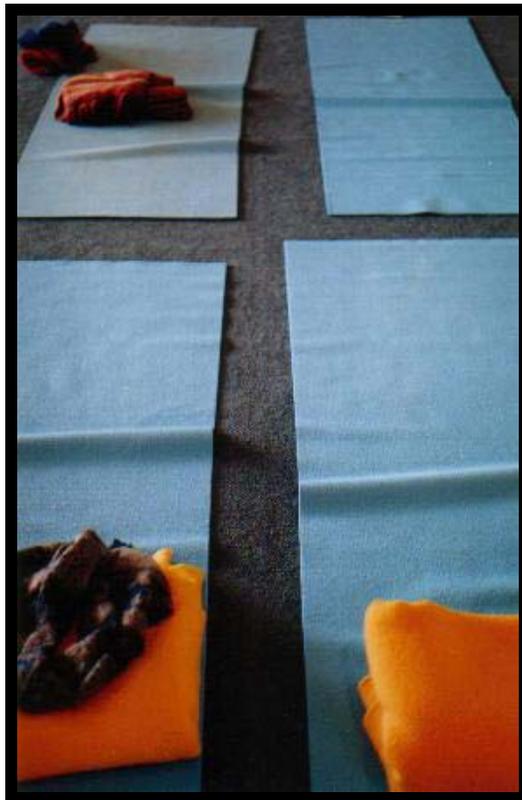


The Effect of Yoga Practice
On
Hope and Optimism in Prisons



Prison practice

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‘You must be someone special to teach in a prison’ is a remark that is sometimes made to me when I talk about the research project I carried out over a six-month period in Perth, Western Australia. Well, we’re all special in one way or another, aren’t we? Often, we need testing or difficult tasks to bring out our hidden strengths. Comparisons are futile so I have absolutely no way of measuring my ability as a teacher in prison or on the outside.

The research project examined the effect of yoga on hope and optimism, and participants were female inmates incarcerated at one of two Western Australian prisons. With the help of fellow yoga instructor, Sofia, I aimed to evaluate the effect of yoga practice on the inmates at Bandyup Women’s Prison, a maximum security prison situated in the Swan Valley, now renowned for its world-class wine and cheese industry and Nyandi Detention Centre in Bentley, a institution aimed at integrating women back into society with a variety of work release programmes.

The students participated in a weekly yoga class of ninety minutes over a period of six months while a control group undertook other optional exercise activities. Details of the yoga practices are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. List of yoga asanas and practices.

<i>Asana</i>	<i>Pranayama</i>	<i>Other</i>
Tadasana	Nadi Sodhana	Chanting
Uttanasana	Bramari	Discourse on yoga philosophy
Utthita Trikonasana	Bastrika	Trataka
Virabhadrasana I	Kapalabhati	Guided meditation and
Virabhadrasana II		visualisation
Virabhadrasana III		Yoga nidra
Utthita Parsvakonasana		
Adho Mukha Svanasana		
Baddha Konasana		
Paschimottanasana		
Salamba Sarvangasana		
Ustrasana		
Savanasana		
Ardha Chandrasana		
Janu Sirsasana		
Bhujangasana		
Vrksasana		
Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana		
Garudasana		

My first mistake in this study was to take ‘no concessions whatsoever to the prison culture’. I can laugh about this now but I rapidly discovered that a person cannot learn from someone who appears far removed from themselves. Mistake number two was ‘challenge them with something tough’. I found that this was already the regime of exercise employed in the prison system with running, weightlifting and basketball the main beneficiaries of precious funding dollars. Mistake number three was, ‘these women have nothing. They’ll be grateful for a few nuggets of wisdom’. I rapidly discovered that ‘these women’ were very similar to me, learning more and more about themselves daily and striving to find some sense of stability and truth in this crazy world we all live in!

Yoga therapy’s emphasis on methods of coping provides techniques for dealing with stress and anxiety and is usually experienced early in the therapeutic process providing the desire for real change. We found that once the students began to experience “success” in their practice, they also begin to perceive positive learning experiences in almost any situation. The students were able to recognise their own growth and their attitude towards themselves, others and their environment begin to change. And as it is individuals who ultimately constitute society, there can be no reconstruction of society without the reconstruction of the individual!

Nothing prepares you for the culture shock of teaching in prison. I agonised over the choice of venue for this research project. I could have conducted it at a private yoga studio, I had many to choose from, but I decided to *really* put yoga (and myself) to the test, so to speak. Where could yoga be of the most benefit??

As our study began, I was not unduly upset by what is euphemistically called a ‘lack of social skills’. The women were marvelously frank in their views on each and every class and questioned us constantly providing a refreshing change from the stony silence sometimes seen in an ‘outside’ classes. What shocked me most was the poor physical shape of the women, who were mostly young, when they came into class. They were often either extremely underweight, or overweight, with pale complexions and lifeless expressions. Their health was wrecked by self-neglect and drug abuse experienced outside, as well as inside, the prison confines. Their vulnerability and lack of self-esteem was often concealed behind a fragile layer of bravado and defiance.

We found the main difficulty in implementing and researching the effects of yoga in prison was that there were a large number of short term and remand prisoners. With such a shifting population, many of the participants were only be able to attend for a short period of time before being transferred or released. However, the women transferred in this study were found to be at either one of the women’s prison or detention centres involved thus not affecting the research.

In comparing other research projects, we found that women prisoners were much more upfront about their sexuality and personal problems than men. Self-harming is a common problem with depressed, anxious prisoners but more so with women. They were also more apt to ask highly personal questions about our lives which we were instructed not to answer by the prison guards however, I was always happy to give a measured response if appropriate.

Teaching yoga in prison may sometimes be difficult, but it is often hugely rewarding. I have a number of stories to illustrate my point, but one will suffice. Katherine looked like a cartoon caricature of a prison ‘hard case’. She had a mean, scowling expression which was accentuated by her thin lips, sunken cheeks, close-cropped hair and prison pallor. She communicated in monosyllabic grunts. We rounded one lesson off with a simple breath meditation. Katherine’s transformation was like that of Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde in reverse. Her mouth opened a little and her lips thickened. Colour came to her face and her expression softened. The scowl disappeared. As we wound up the lesson, she spoke animatedly about how she could at last think straight. We had many similar experiences, which gave us immense satisfaction and the encouragement to complete the project.

The findings of our study did in fact support the hypothesis that the practice of yoga does improve levels of hope and optimism in prison inmates. The results align with other research into yoga and concepts related to psychological well-being however, the present state of research into yoga as a form of therapy and rehabilitation is still in its preliminary stages. Yoga’s ephemeral benefits are difficult to define and evaluate in a research setting. Researchers investigating the yoga’s role in rehabilitation must recognise the possibility of a paradigm clash and the first essential step must be a thorough examination of the beliefs, models and paradigms that the researchers bring to the investigation. Along with this goes the need for a willingness to be open to the possibility that yogic practices may represent systems and paradigms that, although different, are as sophisticated as current scientific models.

I feel there is a great need for launching scientifically planned physiological and psychological studies so that yoga may emerge as a health science on a sound scientific footing. As researchers build a body of studies and trials confirming what yoga practitioners know so well, it may still come down to being in and with our bodies in ways yet too profound to measure to fully experience the benefits of yoga.

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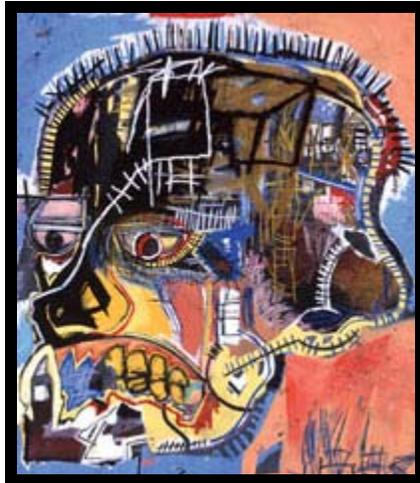
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copy of jean-michel basquiat artwork of a female inmate



shoes in class