

yoga

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BREAKFAST OF YOGIS

Peace on the Inside

For kids in the juvenile justice system, yoga and meditation programs offer the rare and life-changing opportunity to find calm and comfort within.

Seventeen-year-old J. D. Alfonzo has been locked up more than once. Most recently, it was for a charge of assault with a deadly weapon and violation of probation, after he was implicated in a park shooting in Oakland, California. Having to spend up to 18 hours alone each day in his cell at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center left him feeling isolated and tense. In the few moments he was around others, his rage made him combative.

“I was like a gun. Someone just had to pull my trigger, and I’d snap,” says Alfonzo, who fought at the slightest provocation. When he noticed a few other inmates coming from a group session with smiles on their faces and brownies in hand, he became intrigued. He asked around and learned that if he followed the prison rules for one week, he could earn the privilege of attending the thrice-a-week gatherings conducted by a group called the Mind Body Awareness (MBA) Project.

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● BY KEITH KACHTICK AND DIANE ANDERSON

● ILLUSTRATIONS BY JANICE KUN



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There, the boys grapple with philosophical questions such as Who am I? Am I separate from what I do? They investigate basic goodness, identity, and forgiveness as well as develop listening and empathy skills. Leaders also introduce simple meditations to help prisoners learn how to calmly be with whatever emotions arise in the present moment. The boys count their breaths and do body scans to get into their bodies, relax, and find freedom from reactivity.

The idea of spending less time in solitary (along with the promise of brownies) may have lured Alfonzo initially, but once he started attending the MBA meetings, he looked forward to them. Each session offered a brief respite from isolation, a glimpse of self-awareness, and a chance to connect to others who had similar lives filled with drugs and gangs. "I always thought that I was trapped, and I always blamed everyone else for my problems. Thinking it over and talking with others, I was able to sort out my ideas. It really opened up my eyes," he says.

Now at home on probation and wearing an ankle monitor, Alfonzo talks about how he still uses a breathing technique, which he learned in group sessions, to control his temper. "My anger and other people just don't mix," he says. "So I breathe and count to get bad thoughts out of my head. My eyes are more open now, and I realize what's really important: My daughter [nine-month-old Malia Natalia] needs me to be cool."

The gifts of both yoga and mindfulness—tuning in to one's experience, learning to distinguish one's perceptions from reality, controlling one's mind, connecting with others, holding positive thoughts—are especially helpful to ease the stress, fear, and pain that troubled youths so often experience. Unfortunately, not every at-risk youth gets such exposure. But a handful of nonprofits are looking to introduce more kids to contemplative practices in order to offer them valuable tools for dealing with life in new ways.

A REAL NEED

"At its worst, the structure at many programs is punishment, not treatment," says Jon Oda, a senior instructor with the MBA Project. "We meet people where they're at and let them have their space. We introduce a straightforward method of meditation, an easy breathing practice that helps them to sleep at night. They are so stuck in a circle of stress, of uncertainty and powerlessness, that most of them are willing to try it." The simple gift of quieting down the internal chatter in a safe environment is invaluable to kids who are spending time behind bars.

The United States incarcerates more of its youth than does any other country in the world. In 2007 alone, U.S. law enforcement agencies made an estimated 2.18 million arrests of persons under age 18. A third of America's juvenile halls report being at or over capacity, and one in 12 youth prisons has more residents than beds. Up to 70 percent of jailed

teens are serving time for nonviolent crimes. Most of the locked-up teens have forgotten what a healthy, deep breath feels like.

A decade ago, there was considerable wariness in America's juvenile justice system about offering foreign-seeming yoga to its teenage residents. Soren Gordhamer, founder of the Lineage Project, an award-winning nonprofit that offers yoga in juvenile halls in New York City, began teaching inside youth prisons in 1997. With no funding, he and the other volunteer instructors supplied all the sticky mats and left the Sanskrit terminology at the prison's front door, calling the hour of hatha yoga and meditation an "inner martial arts" class. Warrior Pose II became Staring Down Your Devil. Dharma lessons were delivered via a boom box blasting Michael Franti's hip-hop lyrics.

Gordhamer discovered early on that teens in juvenile halls are hungry for practices like yoga. "With all their outward stuff taken from them—their families and friends, their clothes, their public identity, even their choice of food—juvie kids are left with nothing but questions," he says. "Why I am here? How can I wake up from this nightmare? What can nobody take away from me?" Incarcerated teens can be precociously inward looking. Call it what you will, yoga teaches these kids they're alive right now. A light comes on, and they discover how being present can free you from fear."

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peace on the inside

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Today, various programs are offering young offenders life tools. These groups might come at asana and meditation in different ways, but they share a common goal: to help troubled teens look at themselves and consider alternative ways of being. The programs aim to offer insight into human psychology and help kids reflect on their habitual patterns, in hopes that they'll open up to new approaches. Or, at the very least, that they'll be calmer as they return to their turbulent environments after serving time.

ON THE INSIDE

Most yoga classes in juvenile halls are voluntary and segregated by gender, though rival gang members might be stuck next to each other in a meditation circle or on neighboring yoga mats. Boys often have to be coaxed to remove their shoes and socks, because it makes them feel exposed. It's often the kid in the back pretending to snore who's paying the most attention. It's the rare juvenile hall class

get involved

Several programs across the country are hoping to make a difference in young people's lives. To make a donation or volunteer your time, visit these websites and find out how to get involved:

The Art of Yoga Project

Northern California
theartofyogaproject.org

Lineage Project

New York lineageproject.org

Mind Body Awareness Project

Northern California mbaproject.org

Niroga Institute

Oakland and Berkeley, California
niroga.org

Street Yoga

Portland, Oregon
streetyoga.org

Vajra Yoga

New York vajrayoga.com

Yoga Behind Bars

Seattle
yogabehindbars.com

Y.O.G.A. for Youth

Los Angeles
yogaforyouth.org

that makes it to the closing Om without interruptions from alarm bells, a pickup basketball game at the other end of the gym, or an emergency lockdown caused by a fistfight elsewhere in the prison.

Perhaps it's this challenging atmosphere that leads yoga to touch the lives

of incarcerated youth in unexpected ways. Gordhamer recalls how a co-teacher was listening closely to a resident talk about the many difficulties in his young life. The instructor was intently focused on the young man, who seemed uncertain about the attention he was getting. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" the teacher responded.

"You were looking at me strange."

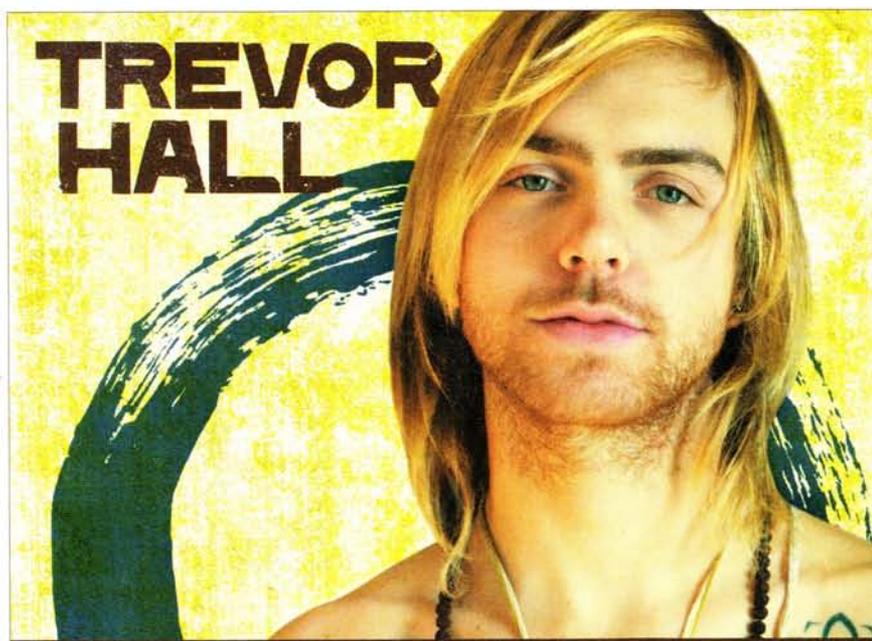
"I was just listening to you."

After a long pause, the young man responded, "I guess no one has ever really listened to me before."

Gordhamer describes teaching a youth named Jamal, a heavily tattooed 17-year-old who was a bit of a loner. Although he attended yoga class every week, the boy never really participated.

"I couldn't figure him out," says Gordhamer. "I wondered, Why does he keep coming to class if he's not interested in yoga? I even got a little frustrated with him. Yet, week after week, Jamal showed up to class, went through the motions, and always thanked me and gave me a hug afterwards. The hugs were the juvenile hall kind—quick, with a pat on the back—but they were still hugs. And then it hit me: That's why Jamal came every week. For the hug. What he really needed was some care and human touch."

Shawn Kent, the founder of Green Dharma, a nonprofit based in Austin,



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Texas, has seen the same thing in yoga classes he offers at Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center. "In cultures where people don't touch each other much, there's significantly more aggression," he says. But not everyone in juvenile hall is going to ask for a hug.

"I use anatomy charts and discuss with the kids in scientific terms how stretching and mindful touch relax the body," Kent says. "Bottom line, yoga works."

REINVENTING SELF

Girls make up about 15 percent of the youth-prison population. The Art of Yoga Project, founded in 2003 by nurse practitioner and yoga instructor Mary Lynn Fitton, serves girls in San Francisco and Bay Area juvenile detention centers.

"Sharing yoga with these young women has been the most profound, rich, and rewarding experience of my life," Fitton says. "We aspire to help them rediscover a deep respect and reverence for their bodies. We team-teach in groups of three or four adult women, role-modeling female connection rather than female competition. And we usually start a class by setting the space with flowers and other inspirational items."

The yoga offered usually includes Warrior poses and partner stretches, breathing exercises, and guided meditation. Fitton says the teachers always offer the girls a chance to work hard with a vinyasa flow, which the teens love because it really relaxes them. "And we'll invite the girls to teach some of the poses, too."

After yoga, the girls work on a creative project, such as drawing, making a collage, or writing. "It gives them a new identity. They've been labeled bad, but now they get to be a yogi, a writer," Fitton says.

When asked shortly before her release from youth prison what came to mind when she heard the word "yoga," one 15-year-old girl who took classes with the Art of Yoga Project wrote in her closing evaluation, "I think of being calm. And prepared. There's a light. A bright light like the sun. And strength of character. Stuff like love, just loving yourself. Yoga has made me realize that when you do yoga, you learn to depend on yourself."

Seventeen-year-old Gabriella (a pseudonym for a girl who asked that her real name not be used) agrees. "Yoga really does help," she says. "It helps you learn to relax and be nice to other people and balance your life better."

Last January, in an unprecedented show of support by a youth prison for the value of yoga, Gabriella and two other residents from the Margaret J. Kemp Camp for Girls in San Mateo, California, were escorted by institution counselors to Berkeley to attend a fundraiser for the Art of Yoga Project hosted by Anusara Yoga teacher Desirée Rumbaugh. "It was exciting," says Gabriella. "At first I was like, what the heck, we're going to go practice yoga for two hours? But it was fun."

A BRIGHTER TOMORROW

More and more these days, raised eyebrows about teaching yoga to jailed teens have given way to good press and praise from the judicial system. "The Art of Yoga is likely the most valuable program offered at Camp Kemp," says director

Glenda Miller. "We feel very fortunate that our residents receive the benefits of this powerful yet peaceful practice." The Probation Department in San Mateo County, California, has even committed its support to youth-prison yoga and meditation classes with \$50,000 of its budget.

Gabriel Kram, the MBA Project's director of consulting services, is pleased to see the growing acceptance of contemplative practices as effective tools to help at-risk kids. "We routinely evaluate youth and probation staff after running our intervention programs," he says. "Through these evaluations, we've been able to pinpoint several consistent benefits: Youth tend to have greater control of their emotions; there's a marked increase in peaceful resolution; and they're more likely to ask for help when they need it."

While the work done inside institutions is important, many kids need help after they get out. Alfonzo thrived when he learned meditation at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center. But now, on the outside, he feels a bit lost. "When



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peace on the inside

I was inside and working with the group, it was good," he says. "But now that I'm out, I feel kind of alone."

This is exactly why the MBA Project hopes to get funding for its proposed "aftercare" program that will offer support and resources to kids once their sentences have been served. But the most long-term thinking may be to offer yoga and meditation classes to kids before they get too deep into trouble.

Andre Lackner never served time, but he was well on his way. He grew up in a turbulent neighborhood in Inglewood, California, and his alcohol use, destructive behavior, and lackluster academic performance got him kicked out of high schools twice and then placed in a continuation school called Del Rey, where yoga teacher Hala Khouri taught him yoga poses as well as some yoga philosophy. Lackner, then 16, discovered new ways of managing his emotions and interacting with the world.

"After that first yoga session, I got stopped by some cops. As a minority in Los Angeles, you have a lot of hostility

toward cops," says Lackner. "But instead of getting angry or nervous or panicking, I took a breath to calm myself down. I noticed that I can calm myself down and get superchill. 'Wow,' I thought. 'I can make myself relax at will. That's tight!'"

Lackner loved the yoga practice so much that he regularly crossed Los Angeles—a trip that required him to take four different buses—to practice with Khouri at the Exhale studio in Venice. Now 20, Lackner has finished Santa Monica College (a community college) and trained this summer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York. His future is looking brighter than ever.

Lackner says that yoga helped him react less to stressful situations and even helped him to stop using drugs. He says with a laugh, "I realized I could get high off of doing yoga instead." ❖

Keith Kachtick is the founder and director of Dharma Yoga, a Buddhist school of hatha yoga based in Austin, Texas. Diane Anderson is senior editor at Yoga Journal.

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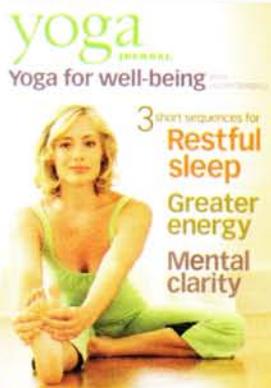
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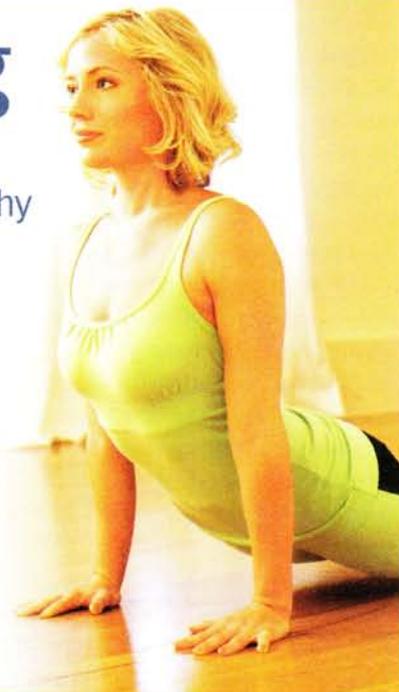
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