Yoga in prisons

By Alan Goode 1989

In 1989, I had the opportunity to teach Yoga within the prison system. I was given a three month teaching contract as part of a Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Programme, in a maximum security gaol. This involved teaching two groups of prisoners each week:

Stage One Prisoners
As a live-in group, participants are isolated from the main gaol and the pressures of prison society for three months. Here, prisoners undertake a programme designed to raise self-esteem and confidence, and equip the individual to support the change in attitude needed for life without drugs. All classes are compulsory.

Stage Two Prisoners
These prisoners returned to the main gaol daily, participating voluntarily in classes and contact groups.
As a teacher I often meet people willing to question their attitudes and approach to life, and so I was keen to see how prisoners without any yoga experience or inclination would approach Iyengar Yoga.
Having never been inside a gaol, I was at first intimidated by the oppressive nature of the high stone walls, iron bars and heavily armed guards dotted in observation towers. Upon entering I was searched, and questioned on the use of my yoga equipment, especially the belts. Without the covering authority of the superintendent I would never have been able to enter with such equipment.

On meeting the groups I took time to explain something about yoga and practice, by demonstrating asanas and answering questions in the hope of sparking interest. We looked at physical problems the groups had, as I explained that Iyengar yoga develops stamina, agility, tenacity and clarity. For most, these attributes were not held in high esteem. Being an environment where strength is an asset, many prisoners spent a great deal of each day weight training. As a result there are many muscular and joint problems.

We worked initially on exploring the standing poses and digesting the results. Gradually, twists were introduced and then inversions. Teaching was difficult at the best of times. especially so with those suffering the complexities of withdrawal symptoms. I was often confronted with the refusal to co-operate and had to discuss and probe for explanation. We explored the difficulties they encountered in their lives and how they dealt with them and tried to investigate those emotions which came up in the yoga practice.

What struck me time and again in these first classes together was how the loss of choice directly affects motivation, personal involvement, and level of effort. Many of the prisoners, subdued mentally and physically by their situation, did not want to challenge themselves.

Yoga is a daily choice, a choice to take responsibility for our actions and situation. The prison system, as far as I could see, was intended to punish people by stripping them of their personal identity, as opposed to assisting them or reforming their ideas.

I was also struck by the complexity of fear I encountered:
*fear of the unknown
*fear of change
*fear of failure
*fear of isolation (peer group pressure)
*fear of drowning in emotion

We all confront fear in our day to day lives. For prisoners, their emotions and responses are closer to the surface. Fear can be both positive and negative. Negative if it blinds us and limits our expansion. Positive if our ideas are challenged and questioned, causing us to assess our direction. To approach yoga is to take on a complex and demanding art form' and through its challenge we learn to discipline ourselves. It is a mirror through which we

can observe our own emotions and attitudes. In yoga practice we must confront our weaknesses and fears, or our practice becomes only a way of reinforcing our sense of self and strengthening the walls around us.

We all know the fear of the first Handstand.- Can I hold my the weight of my body? . . I can't breathe, ."Why am I afraid?' How does the feeling come?

You are not asked to succeed in Yoga. Just to attempt, and to look at what happens. Slowly, slowly a small kick at first.
As we start to observe in the movement, the fear becomes workable and the mind becomes clearer. In this way we move from achieving poses to exploring asanas. Exploring the body, moods and emotions. Then Handstand is only a question of time.

Anger was never far from the surface in gaol. Anger at isolation! treatment by the warders, the government and society. While teaching, I was constantly aware of statements such as 'If we were given . . ' and 'If things were a little different . . ' How often have you become angry with a teacher as they pushed you on to your maximum when you felt that you had done enough? Or frustrated and angry when a movement doesn't come, or the balance isn't there. When we become angry we often become victims. There is a feeling of injustice committed by someone or something. We are all victims of our emotions at times, and this stifles our ability to act clearly.

Towards the end of my term I began realising that I had learnt more about myself than they had learnt from me. In teaching others, you have to confront the same elements in yourself.

Yoga is to take responsibility. Day by day we come to our mat -sometimes inspired, sometimes not. It is our ability to work with all the flavours that creates change. We are all victims of circumstance, and never fully in control of our emotions. So what makes us 'better' than prisoners, whose circumstances were probably worse than our own from the beginning?
It is our capacity to adapt to the challenges of life, to admit our weaknesses with humility, which is our strength.