

A black and white photograph of a man with extensive tattoos on his arms and chest, looking through vertical metal bars. The word "FREEDOM" is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image, and "YOGIS" is written in the same style below it.

FREEDOM YOGIS

DEARBHLA KELLY
PHOTOS: ROBERT STURMAN

How do you mentally prepare to visit a prison? Until you've actually witnessed human beings locked behind bars, living 350 to a dorm where there is absolutely no privacy, there's not really any adequate preparation.

Prisoners' lives are highly circumscribed. Those 350 guys crowded into a dorm may have some autonomy: they can rest, shower, have their cornrows redone at the pop-up barbershop pretty much on their own time. However, life in the dorm is regulated not just by prison rules, but also by the sophisticated and highly-developed code among the inmates themselves. The dorm is divided along racial and ethnic lines. Blacks, Asians, Northern Mexicans, Southern Mexicans, Aryans — all group together in what amounts to *de facto* segregation.

An unwritten code of behavior exists among those who live in the dorm, most people know their place in the hierarchy, and those who overshoot get dealt with mercilessly. The guys always have to be on guard, for at any moment chaos could break out. Life in the dorm is unpredictable, stressful, and tinged with the hum of low-grade anxiety. Hypervigilance, anxiety, frustration, and aggression make for a potent cocktail, a perfect storm of stress.



PHOTOS: ROBERT STURMAN

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On the face of it, it's not the most likely environs for a relaxing yoga practice, but incarceration turns out to be the ideal environment for the self-reflection that yoga practice can elicit. I got to experience this first hand in December 2011 at the Deuel Vocational Institution (DVI), in Tracy, CA. My friend artist/photographer Robert Sturman had invited me along to experience and write about the yoga program at DVI. Sturman has been documenting yoga in the California prison system since 2010, and his evocative photographs have appeared in numerous publications and exhibition spaces.

Bay Area yoga teacher Swapan Munshi runs the yoga program at DVI and has been leading a weekly yoga class for the inmates since early 2010. He was gracious enough to allow me to guest teach on the day I visited.

I was unprepared for how moving the experience of practicing yoga with the inmates would be. There are times in life

when the veil separating the ordinary from the extraordinary becomes thinner, when the transcendent expands and absorbs us into its fold, when we are part of something much bigger than us, something timeless. We don't get to design such vortexes of profundity; they are divinely orchestrated, a thing of grace. Yoga with these guys was one of those times.

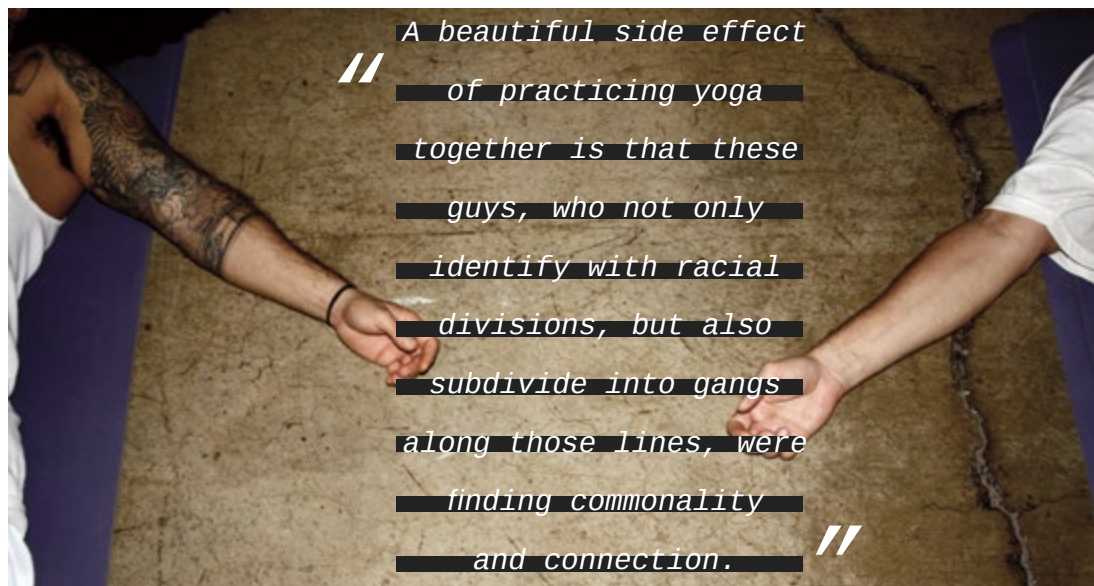
To get to the practice area, we walked through Z Dorm, a huge, windowless gymnasium converted into a dorm room for 350 guys. It was difficult not to look around, to try and take it all in. But that would have felt like a violation; those guys have lost all vestiges of privacy as it is. They sleep on bunk bed cots, their few belongings draped over the railings. As we walked past the shower and toilet area, in my peripheral vision I could see guys showering in their underwear and sitting on the toilet. I tried to filter it out, so as not to participate in the systemic violation of basic human dignity.

The practice area itself was a repurposed section of the gymnasium, an anteroom of sorts. It was a low-roofed, freezing cold room with concrete floors, exposed piping, and one tiny, barred window. There were bikes, abdominal strengthening machines, old exercise equipment, a punching bag, and some anatomy posters on the walls. Millions of miles from the yoga studios of Santa Monica and other celebrated meccas of yoga, it was a sacred space for those guys, a refuge from the chaos of the dorm.

Leading yoga practice with the guys brought out the very best in me as a teacher: I tapped into a place of unconditional love and empathy and one hundred percent focus. It wasn't about doing a fancy sequence. It was more about being a vessel for a practice that offers transformation and freedom. After practice, some of the guys hung out, and we talked about what yoga means to them.

Without exception, they were eloquent

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and sincere. Although they mentioned the physical benefits of practicing *asana*, they were much more animated about the psycho-spiritual and emotional benefits. They talked about how the time they spent doing yoga functioned as a reset mechanism, allowing them to clear their heads and escape from the chaos, unpredictability, and unrelenting tension of life in the dorm. In rich language, they described how yoga gives them the tools to become less reactive, to develop self-control. They emphasized that learning to breathe through their yoga practice, even when it was difficult or challenging emotions came up, helped them to remember to breathe in difficult situations off the mat. So, they were able to reduce conflict in their interactions with other inmates by pausing to take a breath and then responding, rather than blindly reacting.

Let me set the scene here: these were self-described homies and lifers. These were guys who had seen some gnarly stuff and been to some gnarly places and had committed violent crimes, scenes that most of us associate with the movies. Deep, dark stuff. And yet, they distilled the essence of yoga into colorful, poetic, and evocative language that cut right to the heart of why yoga makes a difference in our lives. Many of the guys said that initially they were reluctant to try yoga, but once they did, they were hooked. I asked the guys how they would respond to a hypothetical objector to prisoners having access to yoga. Shannon, a lifer, answered thus:

The program is trying to eliminate tension and helps to eliminate diseases that result from tension. When you're less tense, you're gonna respond differently to other people. You're not gonna automatically snap at someone else. You're gonna think about the causes of the conflict and have empathy for the other person. The work is thinking about somebody else and what they're going through. They might be having a bad day. Hey, don't make it worse. The meditation and the practice teaches you that. It teaches you to calm down.

To a man, the guys in the room, black, white, and Latino, nodded their heads and murmured in agreement. A beautiful side effect of practicing yoga together is that these guys, who not only identify with racial divisions, but also subdivide into gangs along those lines, were finding commonality and connection. Yoga was helping them to transcend the elaborate political dynamics of prison life.

Those guys were way beyond yoga as a physical practice, way beyond needing the right clothes or the eco-friendly yoga mat. Their experience of incarceration actually gave them a much greater insight into the depth of what yoga practice offers in terms of internal transformation. They were choosing to avoid conflict and journey deeper inside themselves.

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It was very humbling to listen to the inmates describe what yoga is doing for their lives and how it's impacting their ability to peacefully navigate life in the dorm. This is where yoga really matters: in eliminating tendencies that cause conflict and suffering and substituting them with skillful ways of responding. Patanjali, the great scholar and codifier of the yoga system, wrote that the concern of the yoga aspirant should be with the avoidance of suffering that's yet to come: *Heyam dukham anagatbam*.

By practicing yoga, the inmates are cultivating responsiveness over reactivity, the ability to make different choices. They are freedom yogis, ironically so, given their place behind bars. Just like all of us who practice yoga, they make progress one breath at a time, slowly but steadily finding more peace, and in whatever small way, making their world a better place.



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Images courtesy of Robert Sturman, an artist/photographer based in Santa Monica, California. www.RobertSturmanStudio.com