

Yoga and Restorative Justice in Prison: An Experience of “Response-Ability to Harms”

Lila Rucker

Self-mastery is a 4000-year-old Vedic concept referring to growth in one’s capacity to discover the various dimensions of one’s own personhood—physical, mental, and spiritual—and to use those dimensions in a conscious, skillful way. Seven men who had been convicted of violent offenses and incarcerated in a U.S. mid-western maximum security prison volunteered to embark on a journey toward self-mastery by participating in yoga and meditation classes for three months as part of an exploratory research project. This paper draws on their journal entries and interviews. Content analysis reveals a continuum of desires and reported benefits from yoga and meditation. As the range of desires broadened, so did the benefits, including the emergence of certain individuals’ “own truths” and a sense of “meaningfulness rooted in a higher purpose.” It was in the spacious openness of disciplined self-awareness wherein some men found “response ability” and, thus, themselves, as well as others.

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The Transformative Nature of Self-Mastery

A single row of seven men sit cross-legged atop thin cotton blankets on the chapel floor of a mid-western maximum-security prison: the head, neck, and trunk of each man stretches ever so slightly toward the ceiling, gracefully inviting erect spines and expanded rib cages, as arms are allowed to relax and hands gently rest on folded knees or thighs. Deep, slow, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing settles in, quieting nerves, calming emotions, stilling restless minds and bodies as tension visibly falls away from foreheads, jaws, nostrils, corners of mouths, necks, shoulders, backs, knees, and thighs.

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Eyes are softly closed; faces are open, serene. The only sound: the whirl of electric fans—rotating first to one side, then to the other—cooling hot, mid-summer, late afternoon air. Exquisite stillness fills the sanctuary. I, sitting atop my kneeling bench (out of respect for my 58-year-old arthritic right hip), sit facing this line of men: four to my right, three to my left. Joining the unbroken line of seekers reaching far back into antiquity who have preceded us in our search for “the way through,” we sit in silent meditation: breathing, focused, still. This was to be the last time we would sit together.

What brought us here, to this point? Sharing a common history of having been convicted of violent offenses and enduring long years of incarceration in this very prison, each of these men had responded to an invitation I had extended to them 12 months earlier: to embark on a journey toward self-mastery as volunteers in an exploratory research project. I had explained to them that self-mastery is a 4000-year-old Vedic concept that refers specifically to growth in one’s capacity to: (1) discover all of the various dimensions of one’s own personhood—physical, mental, and spiritual; and (2) to use those various dimensions in a conscious, skillful way (Nuernberger, 1996). I told them that contrary to popular belief, yoga is neither a beauty cult nor a religion but rather a science, a methodology (Rama, 1976). According to yoga science:

[We are] citizens of two worlds: the external world of relationships, work, family, and community, and the internal world of our deepest inner reality. The greatest of all human achievements is to live skillfully in both of these worlds and learn to balance these two aspects of life. (Gendron, 1996, p. vii)

The word “yoga” is Sanskrit and comes from the root *Yuj*, meaning to join together or unite (Rama, 1976), the goal of the various aspects of yoga (e.g., deep relaxation, the conscious execution of breathing techniques, yoga postures, concentration, and, finally, meditation) being to bridge the gap between the inner and outer worlds by calming down the parts of the mind that are too noisy. This calming, in turn, allows the witnessing of one’s own thoughts, sensations, emotions, and urges (Rama, 1976), enabling one to gain sufficient distance from them to attain response ability and reduce emotional reactivity (Nuernberger, 1996). As Swami Veda Bharati, President of the Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences in Dehradun, India, instructs: “[J]ust as we cleanse and refresh our mouths daily by brushing our teeth, so can we cleanse and refresh our minds daily by meditating” (personal communication, March 17, 2001). Just as I had been intrigued by this ancient invitation to self-exploration, cleansing, and growth, so had this group of men.

It was no accident that of all the people with whom I could be “sitting” (the term used for “doing meditation”), I had chosen men who find themselves incarcerated in a maximum security prison. Over the past 20 years in prisons across the U.S., I have experienced the transformative nature of deeply respectful and nurturing environments in tens of dozens of intensive, three-day Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) conflict resolution workshops that are organized by volunteers and, thus, not under the auspices of the administration (Rucker, 1991). In these workshops, I invariably witness a quickening toward joyous openness, aliveness, and willingness to participate in the

making of a less violent life for oneself and others that is born in an environment of loving kindness and dignity. Given this background, and my own several-years-long experience with yoga and meditation, I wanted to extend the sacred invitation to self-exploration and self-mastery to incarcerated men. Upon finally finding work in mainstream criminological literature that linked the spiritual to a discussion of violence and violence prevention, I was thrilled.

Drawing from his 25-year experience of working with violent boys and men, psychologist James Garbarino concluded that spiritual anchors are often the starting point for the “path back from violence” since they refer to those aspects of life which “engender a sense of meaningfulness rooted in higher purpose and a more enduring reality” (Garbarino, 1999, p. 152). Garbarino argues that it is only after a spiritual anchor is in place—and individuals have begun to grapple with the meaningfulness for which they yearn—that educational programs, counseling, vocational experiences, and regular psychotherapy can help.

My own sense of what it means to be spiritual comes close to the yogic concept of self-mastery and has long matched that of Wayne Teasdale, trustee board member of the Parliament of the World’s Religions: a “personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality.” Mirroring Garbarino, Teasdale (1999, p. 17) argues that the greatest single resource for changing the centuries-old trajectory of violence is spirituality, since it allows inward change, while at the same time simplifying external life. Pointing to daily spiritual practice as the “technology of inner change,” Teasdale (1999, p. 128) states that spiritual practices—prayer, meditation, sacred reading, music, chanting, yoga and certain martial arts, hiking, walking, and so on—cultivate a profound self-knowledge, which allows one’s actions in the world to become consistent with one’s inner change.

Teasdale’s reference to profound self-knowledge rings true. As psychologist Phil Nuernberger instructs, however, self-knowledge in the context of self-mastery refers not to what one thinks about oneself but rather of what one is aware of about oneself, of one’s experience of oneself. Self-knowledge (awareness), then, is an on-going process wherein one learns to be a witness—an observer—of oneself and the world, and to discover the hidden relationship between body, mind, and spirit. Self-discipline (skill), on the other hand—the second essential element of self-mastery—is the ability to do what one chooses to do and stems from habits that are practiced and refined (Nuernberger, 1996).

Importantly, however, as Nuernberger points out, not all habits (e.g., violence) are healthy. Moreover, changing deeply engrained habits such as (violent) behavioral patterns is not an easy task, because one’s awareness must be complete and constant. As Nuernberger suggests:

[If] we are only partially aware of the entire pattern of a habit that lies hidden in the unconscious mind, our conscious mind decides to do one thing while our unconscious mind programs a different behavior. Whichever level of awareness has the highest emotional charge will dictate the course of action. Awareness is not *knowing about* a habit; it is direct *experience* of the habit itself. Intellectual understanding is like thinking about food, where awareness is tasting it. (Nuernberger, 1996, p. 87, emphasis added)

Nuernberger's distinction between knowing about or intellectually understanding a habit, as opposed to experiencing that habit, lies at the very heart of understanding why and how spiritual practices act as a catalyst for inner change and growth and are, thus, transformative. Drawing from his many years of personal experience with the principles and practices of yoga science, Nuernberger reveals that he, himself, was able to quit smoking when he was able to experience—to feel and, thus, specifically identify—the impact of cigarette smoke in his lungs and the depressing effect of the carbon monoxide and other gases on his body. As he became exquisitely self-aware through self-discipline in step-wise and comprehensive yogic training, his body and mind became finally quiet enough to stop his mind chatter, allowing him to register the subtle effects of the intrusive inhalant and its negative side effects. Moving beyond the intellectual understanding, “I value my health and believe that smoking is harmful for my health,” to an unequivocal experience of the truth of that knowledge, a deep integration of his values and beliefs with his “own truth” occurred, enabling him to focus all the energies of his mind one-pointedly. Because there was now no internal conflicts between his thoughts, emotions and actions, “stopping smoking was very simple” (Nuernberger, 1996, p. 247).

At the deepest level, then, self-mastery seems to have everything to do with growth in one's capacity to “hear” one's own truth. To realign oneself with that truth is to discover the sense of meaningfulness which is inherent in that truth. Meaningfulness derived from this depth is rooted in the “higher purpose and more enduring reality” about which Garbarino speaks (1999, p. 152). Yet, as Teasdale instructs, immediate experience of this enduring or “ultimate” reality is “always practical: its experience is eminently beneficial to a person's life and well-being. Because it concerns one's ultimate situation, it is never abstract. It always contributes to one's inner landscape and the development of individual character” (Teasdale, 1999, p. 22). Such capacity derives from awareness at a deep experiential level. As exemplified by the men in this study, such experiences do not have to be earthshaking, though they are profound.

The Project: The Journey Toward Self-Mastery

This paper focuses on one aspect of a larger project, the purpose of which was to document the process rather than the fact of self-mastery as 21 men who had been incarcerated for violent crimes in a mid-western maximum security prison participated in yoga and meditation classes. This analysis is based on input from seven of the total 21 men; these seven men maintained high attendance throughout the entirety of the three-month project.

Yoga and meditation classes met for two hours twice a week for three months. At the end of the three-month period, classes continued, and those who wanted to stay on were invited to do so. Of the seven men included in this analysis, four accepted the invitation to stay on, continuing to attend classes regularly until the 12-month follow-up assessment. During this latter period, classes met once a week for four hours on Sunday afternoons.

The yoga/meditation classes included instruction in: (1) breath and body awareness through deep relaxation and various breath control strategies; (2) the relationship

between body, breath, and mind through guided concentration during the learning and practice of hatha yoga postures and breathing exercises; (3) meditation; (4) the relationship between the sensory mind and the development of perceptions, language, emotions, and habits; (5) the relationship between the body, breath, and sensory mind and the dragons (habits) of fear, self-hatred, and loneliness; and (6) the Vedantic philosophy of the five *yamas* (restraints) of non-injury, truthfulness, moderation, non-possessiveness, and non-theft and the five *niyamas* (observances) of self-study, purity, contentment, austerity or physical and mental discipline, and surrender.

Analysis is based on journal entries each man kept during the three-month project as well as input from one-to-one interviews each man completed with me at the 12-month follow-up assessment. During the interviews, I typed participant responses on my laptop computer. As evidenced by the extent and caliber of responses provided by the men, this format did not impede data collection.

Of the 21 men who started the project, only 10 (48%) completed it. Four (19%) were either transferred to other facilities or paroled out prior to the project's end. At the 12-month follow-up assessment, some of the men offered voluntary explanations as to their leaving the project: one man had been shot in the neck years earlier and yoga made his fingers numb; another wanted to have time to himself while his roommate attended the class; and another said he wanted to visit with his wife and that his Christian beliefs seemed to keep getting in the way of "getting" the yoga philosophy. While 13 (62%) of the 21 men who started the program were younger (15–30 years of age), the four men who remained in the program until year's end were all in the 31–45 year age category. Importantly, all four of these men were facing longer sentences than the others.

The Process of Change in Self-Mastery

At the outset of the project, participants were asked to explain why they wanted to learn yoga and meditation. At the 12-month follow-up assessment, one of 23 questions posed during one-on-one interviews asked them to explain what they had got out of yoga and meditation. Similar to Shapiro's conceptualization of a progression of meditation expectations from self-regulation, to self-exploration, to self-liberation/compassionate service (Shapiro, 1992, 1994), a continuum was identified that reflected individual participants' desired results from yoga and meditation at the outset of the project as well as the benefits they received and reported at the final follow-up assessment. Using this continuum as a backdrop and rough indicator of readiness, evidence of change was also considered. In this manner, a person's desired results and reported benefits of self-mastery, their experiences of the transformative nature of self-mastery, and their sense of their own spirituality and control were explored. To honor confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Exploration I: Desired Results and Reported Benefits of Yoga and Meditation

If we conceptualize a continuum of desired results and reported benefits from yoga and meditation that ranges from self-regulation, to self-exploration, to self-liberation/

compassionate service, the input from Mark, John, and Frank clusters toward the lower end of the continuum. In keeping with their initial and single desire for self-regulation, each highlighted the relaxation and stress management benefits derived from breath awareness and yoga. Mark and John, for example, desired self-regulation (“Control over my anger”) and reported self-regulation benefits (“How to breathe correctly”). Frank desired both self-regulation (“To relieve stress”) and self-exploration (“A better prospect [*sic*] of myself”) and reported receiving both (“Paying attention to breathing has helped quiet my mind and relax, and my muscles don’t get knotted up”; “It helps me stay out of trouble”). When asked what in a nutshell they had got out of yoga and meditation, the typical response for these men was “relaxation” and/or “anger control.”

Joe’s input situates him mid-way on the continuum. He desired both self-regulation (“To help reduce my blood pressure”) and self-exploration (“To bring me in touch with aspects of myself I don’t know I have”) and reported receiving three levels of benefit: self-regulation (“Better sleeping habits”), self-exploration (“Regular meditation quiets my mind”), and momentum toward the self-liberation/compassionate service level (“I want to work with Habitat for Humanity because I spent so many years taking”).

Jim, Jack, and Dan cluster toward the upper end of the continuum. Jim desired self-regulation (“I am aware of myself and want to control myself”), self-exploration (“I want to get off meds and don’t want to remain the way I am”), and self-liberation (“Meditation, contemplation, and prayer are musts for spiritual growth”) and received all three (“Breath control”; “I got a tool to advance myself”; “I approach things as a more full person”). Interestingly, while Jack came into the program with a broad and simple desire “to learn what yoga stands for,” he reported benefits of self-regulation (“Awareness of my breath”), self-exploration (“I now love the little child inside me”), and self-liberation/compassionate service (“I now carry the pipe”). Dan came into the project desiring self-exploration (“A peaceful nature”) and self-liberation (“A deeper sense of trust in my world”) and reported benefits of self-exploration (“I’m now aware of this level of self-discipline”) and self-liberation/compassionate service (“I help facilitate self-help classes in the prison”).

In summary, conceptualizing a continuum of desired results and reported benefits from yoga and meditation—that ranged from self-regulation, to self-exploration, to self-liberation/compassionate service—revealed that men seemed to get what they desired. Those who desired only self-regulation received only self-regulation. As desires broadened, so did benefits. Also, two fairly distinct clusters were identified along the continuum: Mark, John, and Frank clustered toward the lower end, Joe was situated mid-range, and Jim, Jack, and Dan clustered toward the upper end. Finally, attendance seemed to correlate somewhat with placement along the desires/benefits continuum: of the four men who kept attending classes beyond the initial three-month period until the 12-month follow-up, only one (Mark) was situated at the lower end of the continuum, one (Joe) was situated mid-range, and two (Jack and Dan) were situated at the upper end. Conversely, of those who did not continue beyond the initial three-month period, two (John and Frank) were situated at the lower end of the continuum, and only one (Jim) was situated at the upper end. Importantly, the fact that Jim stopped attending classes is in keeping with the goal of self-mastery, which is to align oneself

with one's own truths. As reflected in the next section, the emergence of the meaningfulness to Jim of his own cultural roots and heritage became the guiding beacon for him. Thus, leaving the class while maintaining certain of its practices is congruent with the integration of his own truths, values, and beliefs.

Exploration II: Emergence of One's "Own Truth"

As discussed earlier, the transformative nature of the self-mastery process seems to be evidenced by a person's discovery of their own truths and a sense of meaningfulness around those truths. Separate analyses of input from Joe, Jim, Dan, and Jack provide evidence of this.

Joe. Situated mid-range on the desires/benefits continuum, Joe provided an excellent example of the underlying Vedic perspective that the philosophy and spiritual practice of yoga and meditation go hand in hand. As Swami Rama instructs, "[W]ithout *sadhana* [spiritual practice], philosophy remains mere speculation, and without philosophy, *sadhana* remains without a goal" (Rama, 1996, p. 75). For Joe, it was this "all encompassing yoga system" that so pleased him. He stated:

I like to know the how and why of things. It's frustrating if you get a book that says to do this or that—I want to know *why* do this or that. In this system of yoga, they have all the texts that put all that out there for you, and that's why I like it; it satisfies me intellectually.

Reflecting his experience of the integration of philosophy and practice, Joe talked about the relationship between his own body, breath, and mind. He stated:

It's a total relationship. If you're sitting in meditation and your body is moving around, it is going to affect the way your mind is working. Your mind ain't going to be able to become still if your body is not still. The same way with our emotions. If you're thinking angry or violent thoughts, it is going to affect your emotions and make the emotion that you're thinking about start rising, which will affect your body physiologically.

The pragmatic aspects of self-mastery are reflected in the meaningfulness Joe now attaches to a "more peaceful demeanor," the effort he makes not to "adopt an aggressive persona," and the conscious care and development of his "own little *sadhana*," which results in an increased awareness and experience of the relationship between witnessing and quieting his own body, breath, and mind. He is also beginning to feel a desire to "protect animals," and he looks forward to the "ultimate empathy thing" that will come from "further awakening." Additionally, he understands the applicability of the disciplined practice of anything—in this case, the spiritual—to the more mundane aspects of his life such as "forming healthy habits like sitting down and figuring out bills and taxes."

Jim. Jim was among the three men who clustered toward the upper end of the desires/benefits continuum. Jim considered himself to be a spiritual person at each of the three assessment periods (at the outset of the project, at the end of three months, and at the

12-month follow-up). In his final interview, however, he moved away from his initial generic definition of what spirituality means (“religious”) to incorporate and locate the meaning of spirituality within the realm of his own life and own being. When asked to define what spirituality means, he stated: “Basically, it means to just find out what is within yourself that helps you survive and identify yourself.” This definition is given life for this young man in the emergence of his own truth concerning the importance and meaningfulness of his “culture, ancestors, and religion,” the theme which weaves throughout his interview. He explained that he had been raised with “one foot in my culture and one in the white man’s world” and was only now learning the native language of his people. In response to the question “What helps you identify yourself?” he stated: “My culture—finding out about it, and learning about it and the language.”

From the claiming of his cultural roots, a clarification process occurred. When asked what helps him survive, his immediate response was, “The pipe.” From this clarity, a sense of meaningfulness wells: “Something calls you; you become a leader of yourself. There is a willingness to change your life around.” He ends this pronouncement with an evaluative, soft-spoken conclusion: “It’s a humbling thing—not an overpowering thing.” The distinction he makes here is due to awareness of the subtle, a skill of clarity that comes from deep stillness and quietness of the mind, evidence of sustained practice of witnessing oneself. Of the subtle, one of his fellow participants, Dan, said: “I understand what subtle means now. Subtle can be more overwhelming than a large amount: it can slip past your attention.”

When asked what in a nutshell he had got out of yoga, Jim replied that he was able to “spend time with myself, to nurture myself” and “to learn who I was, how much patience I had”—an important self-truth of which he had previously been unaware. The deepening skills of self-patience and self-nurturance allowed his burgeoning self-awareness to broaden sufficiently to acknowledge and experience what he referred to as the “little child inside me.” As he patiently observed the child within, he was able to conclude: “I understand him now, I care about him, I love him and he loves me back.” In keeping with his own definition of helping others (“Being a friend, having a heart, caring, valuing others’ lives”), and reflecting the harmony and integrity that permeate one’s being as deep truths are unearthed and incorporated into one’s own repertoire of meaningfulness, when asked how he nurtures that small child inside himself, his response came from a deep sense of compassion and love:

I talk with, listen to him, and sometimes its just easier to think about holding him in dealing with some of the things he had to deal with when going through those phases in his life; some of them, he didn’t have no control of. I can see that now. It was uncontrollable.

In response to questions about his experience of the relationship between his body, breath, and mind, Jim revealed keen insights about the practical aspects of self-mastery and how the integration—or lack thereof—of these aspects directly affects the three dragons (habits) of fear, self-hatred, and loneliness. About this, he states:

A habit I’ve noticed about my thoughts is that I’m more aware of how each one affects my body emotionally—especially if it was a negative thought or filled with lots of anger. The dragons that I read about helped me understand a lot more of myself and the thoughts that

trigger my behavior. It seems that a lot of the philosophy of yoga is about breaking out of cycles by becoming aware of them through the body. A lot of cycles in thought processes and behavior are the same. A little thing like breathing “correctly” through the stomach instead of the chest helps the body become more relaxed and life a little bit calmer. But that’s not the look-out on the yard; the bigger and puffier the chest, the meaner and stronger they’re perceived to be. Just a simple thing done correctly gets me thinking differently—better or more aware anyway. Simply put, my life has become more simple, and breathing has become the way through for mastering myself. Even in ceremony at the sweat or in conversation with somebody on the tiers, I become aware of more when I’m thinking about my breath. In breathing right, I’ve become patient and less frustrated or unwilling to give up.

For Jim, then, the transformative nature of self-mastery took the form of locating the meaning of spirituality within his own life and own being, the claiming of his cultural roots, an awareness of the meaningfulness to himself of being a “carrier of the pipe,” and the emergence of his own deep truths regarding self-value, self-patience, self-nurturance, compassion, and the invaluable skill of breath awareness.

Dan. Dan considered himself to be a spiritual person at each of the three assessment periods, with explanations of what spirituality means ranging from a sense of a “soul” at the pre-assessment, to surprise at learning that we have “such an active spiritual life and can exercise the control I’ve found we have” at three months, to being “in tune with and motivated by something that’s not tangible in the physical sense” at the 12-month follow-up.

At the outset of the final interview, when asked to list the major events of the past year, the events Dan recounted reflected the emergence of a sense of meaningfulness around several newly-discovered deep truths. For example, he tapped a well of deep compassion within himself that allowed him not only to “totally forgive” his father who had been extremely abusive to him as a child but also to read a “book on violence with healing myself in mind.” He said that “before experiencing the self-mastery project,” he would not “have wanted to admit” that he “needed healing.” This willingness, this determination to do “some really deep soul searching” around the “emotional baggage” he carries because of the abuse he “received and committed against the human family,” was reflected in his statement that self-mastery means

Examining myself completely ... going into areas that are sad ... becoming really honest with myself ... developing the discipline to follow through with any directions I choose for myself [resulting from] the [self-]examination and honesty ... [and] really understand and not just believe—but feel it, understand it—that I’m a member of the human family.

One of the deepest truths that emerged for Dan related to self-discipline. So profoundly meaningful was the truth and merit of self-discipline for him that he brought the discussion back to the topic in response to several questions in the final interview. When asked to identify what had been particularly helpful to him in his endeavors to attain self-mastery, he stated that it was the “very discipline itself that it has taken for me to begin and to stay on the path.” Stating that he has “never, ever exhibited” self-discipline, the fact that “now, all of a sudden, a greater amount was

required for yoga right from the start,” allowed him to discover that “I have this level of discipline; this has been a tremendous discovery for me.”

Such a discovery is transformative. When asked whether he was actively working toward self-mastery, he emphatically stated that he was “paying attention to the areas in my life where I have previously let myself down by now seeing things through.” Moreover, reflecting an engagement with the character development to which Teasdale (1999) alludes, Dan began to clarify and self-evaluate, saying that “complacency and procrastination have been adjectives that accurately described me. I think—I know—it was because I used to not care.” He stated that his recent reading of a passage from one of the books we read and discussed together in the project, *Perennial Psychology of the Bhagavad Gita* (Rama, 1996), had illuminated his own understanding of the concept of time and eternity, allowing him to feel as though he is “not trapped by the past anymore.”

Very significantly, Dan located the transformative nature of self-mastery squarely in the realm of the spiritual. An emergence of the deep truth and meaningfulness in his life of the “spiritual core” is reflected in his response when asked how he sees the dimensions of the physical, mental, and spiritual fitting together in his life. He states:

Physically, I’ve never felt complete. I feel more complete now than I did then, with the work I’m doing on myself. Mentally, I’ve always been out of whack with the rest of me; therefore, balance didn’t exist. Emotionally, I was a very cold person for a very long time. I think I quit feeling as a way to diminish the hurt; I was being hurt so often, and turning off feelings so much, that it just became a natural state I existed in for a very long time. Spiritually, if I hadn’t seen myself in some pure aspect, something that this world couldn’t touch and get to, I don’t believe I would have ever understood or associated anything about myself in a spiritual realm. I felt so soiled, for lack of a better word, by the world that I had been exposed to and interacted with; to know and find that there was a place that the world did not touch, does not—that there was a place I could get to and get back from, because it hasn’t been influenced or changed by the world, is very significant for me.

When asked what in a nutshell he had got out of yoga, Dan very eloquently captured the essence of both the philosophy and practical science of yoga. He stated:

The peaceful, majestic nature of yoga says be quiet and pay attention. If there is one aspect of yoga that was most difficult for me, the moving at a slower pace was it. It was like, “All right already.” It took a while, and I still wrestle with moving my arms slowly. It still is a challenge for me to not move at the hectic pace that I had evolved into. When you rush—you can’t be rushed—because you’re not seeing everything; you’re not giving yourself a chance to digest things. I believe the most crucial part of being self-aware, which is the most crucial part of yoga, is silent observation. You want to hear your thoughts and be aware of your breath and feel your movements. I think that’s control. Out of control would probably be the opposite: moving at a pace too fast for yourself. I’ve yet to see any definition of out of control that is something moving slow.

For Dan, then, the transformative nature of self-mastery manifested in the deep well of compassion he tapped, which, in turn, allowed forgiveness and invited self-healing, and in the tremendous discovery of the deep truth and meaningfulness to himself of self-discipline, his own spiritual core, and the effects of the majestic nature of yoga in his life.

Jack. Jack stopped coming to class for a few weeks during the course of the three-month program. When asked about that at the 12-month follow-up, he explained that he had left so that one of his friends could join the class (newcomers could join as people decided to leave the class, were transferred to another facility, or got out of prison). When the friend dropped out after two sessions, it took Jack a while to get back on the class list.

At the outset of the project, Jack reported that he considered himself to be a spiritual person but did not explain what he meant by spirituality. At both the three-month and 12-month follow-up assessments, however, he reflected an understanding of the relationship between the inner and outer worlds to which Swami Rama (1996) alludes (“A yearning to experience cosmic consciousness and to find the good in myself and others”; “I recognize and try to nurture my connection to both God and mankind on a daily basis”).

Reflecting Ornish’s (1998) point that our own suffering often helps us access our spiritual hearts, the deep truth around which a sense of meaningfulness was confirmed for Jack relates to his years-long climb through depression toward “becoming a well-rounded person, becoming whole.” Rather than seeing these struggles as negative, however, he sees them as being “part of who I am; they’re part of the path that I’ve walked to become me.” This willingness to embrace the entirety of himself mirrors his earlier response when asked what yoga had to do with the day-to-day nitty-gritty of his life: “I approach things that happen in my day more apt to deal with it as a more full person.” When asked how his journey with depression relates to his growth in self-mastery, he said that the psychologist has helped him “identify symptoms to look out for” and yoga helped him “understand the mechanisms of my emotions, how to alter them on a physical level, and how to breathe my way out of temporary situations and calm my way out of long-term situations.” Interesting here is his comment that his psychologist studied yoga in India and “recommended that yoga was a positive force and may be all I need.” Finally, he said, “I stopped taking medications and I don’t miss them.”

Similarly to Jim and Dan, Jack located the transformative nature of self-mastery in the realm of the spiritual. At one point in the interview, he stated: “I like to believe that the conscious connection I have to God or the universe helps me emotionally.” When asked if yoga either reinforces that belief or provides experiences of that conscious connection, he replied that he “sees yoga practice like a doorway to that experience,” and that while yoga is “beneficial physically and emotionally, in a greater context it makes the spiritual connection more easily attained or experienced.” Another other aspect of the transformative nature of self-mastery for Jack is an awareness of the meaningfulness to himself of his own wholeness as a person.

In summary, only those men who desired a broader range of benefits from yoga and meditation than solely self-regulation evidenced the emergence of their own truths that were deeply transformative and meaningful. Still, those men who desired and received only self-regulatory benefits made progress in their journey toward self-mastery in that they, too, grew in their capacity to utilize certain dimensions of themselves.

Insights and Discussion

While yoga and meditation are not embraced by everyone—as evidenced by the fact that of the original 21 men in the larger study from which this analysis has been drawn, 11 (52%) had dropped out before the end of the three-month project—I believe that the steadfastness with which the seven men in this analysis stayed the course throughout the project has to do with the fact that they were being invited to chart their own course. Caught in the snare of the coercive prison environment in which every move is managed and monitored, such an invitation for self-directed exploration enlivened them. What they were being invited to do was very different to “treatment”; indeed, to classify yoga and meditation as treatment in the rehabilitative sense is an oxymoron. The verb “to treat” implies one-way action: a doer and a done to, an actor and a recipient. From this perspective, treatment implies the act or manner or instance of someone doing something to someone or something else (e.g., handling, behaving toward, giving, subjecting, dealing with). In a prison setting, such treatment can very easily become coercive.

However, with the slightest shift of coloration the word takes on an entirely different connotation—when “treat” is used as a noun (e.g., “a treat”) it becomes a “source of joy” (Merriam-Webster, 1997, p. 770). Here, the implication is one of renewal, since the word “source” itself connotes an origin, a beginning, a supplier of something: like the beginning of a stream of water or the fountainhead of a raging river. Here, the action is self-contained, self-borne, self-wrought—and the result is joy. Yoga and meditation as treatment from this perspective, then, take on a completely different hue, with one’s own disciplined self-awareness becoming the methodology, the vehicle, the way through.

In a consideration of restorative as opposed to retributive justice, the distinction between these two competing views of treatment is of paramount importance since it highlights the question of control. If we pay attention, we’ll notice how pronounced is our sense of the necessity of control in our daily lives: we must “control our emotions,” “control our eating habits,” “control our spending,” “control our children,” and on and on. Not surprisingly, the coercive and retributive confines of a prison environment serve only to exacerbate this tendency, with a preoccupation with control pervading all else. Indeed, when asked to define self-mastery at the 12-month follow-up, six of the seven men in this analysis said it meant “being in control.” The single individual who offered a different view was Dan. Although one of the major issues with which he grappled (self-discipline) is akin to control, it is not control. As we become more self-aware, we find that the act of controlling tends to give rise to an actual experience of tightening, restraining, and/or restricting—not only of that which we seek to control but also of those instruments, our body and mind, that are seeking to control: our brows become furrowed, our jaws set, our muscles tense, our voices strained, our breathing shallow, and our emotional state anything but open and flexible. Self-discipline, on the other hand, when consciously entered into with exquisite self-awareness, is antithetical to control in that it gives rise to an experience of openness or allowing. If we are to “see” all there is to be seen when we are engaged in the process of self-observation, we must

loosen rather than tighten our grip, finding clarity and wiggle room—response ability—as a quieted, relaxed, tension-free body and mind allow openness to “what is,” without the noise and constraints of pre-conceived judgments, expectations, and old habitual reactionary patterns.

Recall, Nuernberger (1996, p. 8) defines self-discipline as “doing what one chooses to do.” Choosing implies a more open field, or options, whereas control implies a dwindling field, or limitations. Dan alludes to this choosing aspect of discipline when he refers to self-discipline as “harnessing”—which connotes directing rather than restricting. Jack also alludes to the harnessing aspect of self-discipline in his discussion of his recently attained “ability to sit still for a half hour.” About this he states: “It is amazing to think that a year ago I couldn’t just sit still—that when I sat in a chair, I was balled up; now I can relax.” He defines self-mastery as “the ability to impose my will upon my body and my temper and emotions.” The successful focusing and harnessing of one’s will occurs, we will recall, as a result of the deep integration of one’s own truth, values, and beliefs (Nuernberger, 1996).

Conclusion

In her discussion of the Buddhist concept of *maitri* (the complete acceptance of ourselves as we are), Pema Chodron writes that “only when we relate to ourselves without moralizing, without harshness, and without deception can we let go of harmful patterns. Without *maitri*, renunciation of old patterns becomes abusive” (Chodron, 2001, p. 24). If, as Sullivan and Tifft (2001) argue, one of our evolving goals in restorative justice is to move beyond mere harm denunciation and the affixing of responsibility to “give testimony to the essential worth and gifts of all involved—including the person responsible for the harm” (p. 46), then one of our objectives toward that end must be an awareness of processes that invite one’s integration with oneself. Self-mastery as facilitated by yoga and meditation is one such process.

Mirroring the purest restorative justice principles, Rachel Naomi Remen (2000, p. 218) instructs: “[W]e cannot strengthen someone and violate their integrity at the same time.” On the contrary, she argues: “Blessing the life in someone usually requires a deep respect for their uniqueness, an openness to allowing them to uncover who they are rather than shaping them into who we want or need them to be.” Her point is poignantly made by the emergence of Jim’s tender compassion for the small and still-vulnerable child within himself and the deep meaningfulness he derives from being a “carrier of the pipe”; by Dan’s self-discovered awareness of his own need to heal and do “some really deep soul searching,” his profound experience that he, himself, is a “member of the human family,” and his forgiveness of his abusive father; and by Joe’s yearning to “give back” to society by building homes for Habitat for Humanity.

We must take care, those of us who profess allegiance to restorative justice principles. Let us not fail to see that it might be just as much our responsibility to embark on our own journey toward response ability—in whatever form that might take—as it is that of the “others” with whom we strive toward justice. In the end, restorative justice is about us. There is no “them.” If we are to heal ourselves—for who among us has not

offended, has never violated or been violated by others—we would do well to take to heart Remen’s deep knowing about blessings. She writes:

A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another. By making a place for wholeness within our relationships, we offer [each other] the opportunity to be whole without shame and become a place of refuge from everything in and around [us] that is not genuine. We enable [each other] to remember who we are. (Remen, 2000, p. 6)

The capacity for such blessing comes from the spacious openness inherent in disciplined self-awareness, which is self-mastery. Here, acuity heightens, boundaries expand, and old tethers that still bind loosen, as we become quieter—and ever quieter—and finally—perfectly—still. It is at this point, this still point, where, as T. S. Eliot (1952/1980, p.119) muses, “the dance is”—for it is here at our very core of uncovered goodness where we find ourselves, as well as others. It is here where the seeds of justice reside.

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