

The Redemptive Power of Yoga

Redeem: to regain possession; to pay off; to turn in and receive something in exchange; to fulfill; to rescue or ransom; to make up for.

In 2009 an experience transformed me from casual practitioner to fully committed yogi. It was the Summer Solstice in the heart of Manhattan at the annual Yoga in Times Square event. Several thousand miles from my home on the west coast, the allure of finding peace in the midst of madness had a deeply personal meaning at this stage of my life.

The year before I'd been indicted for mortgage fraud from transactions related to real estate sales in Las Vegas in the mid-2000s. Facing trial and an uncertain future, finding peace within was a matter of emotional and spiritual survival. At that time, I had no idea the extent to which my world would be turned upside down.

There, in the heat of the day amidst a sea of strangers, honking horns, and bright lights, I found a priceless refuge.

In 2012, I was given a 14 year sentence in federal prison. In the years that followed, a practice of yoga and meditation helped maintain a sense of calm that nurtured an inner strength and sense of clarity. This space continues to allow perspective and a balance that has provided a peaceful and powerful foundation in a volatile time and place. After finding my own footing, I began to teach. Yoga became a means to help others not only to survive, but to thrive in a very difficult environment. During my time in prison, one of the freedoms I've maintained is the sacred space that yoga provides. Sharing this with others, I have witnessed healing and transformation of many broken and wounded women -- beginning with myself.

Most women in prison have suffered abuse or trauma. We have all made mistakes, many stemming from violating the Yamas, the ethical restraints that collectively form one of the eight limbs of yoga -- non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing, sexual moderation and non-grasping. Outer actions contrary to the yamas are manifestations of the more subtle internal aspects of mind and body lacking center. Through acknowledging the creation of our own suffering, we can begin to heal it. Like losing balance in a pose and then bringing it back, we take ownership, find our center, and recover that which has been lost -- our freedom, our reputation and our value. Yoga is a means to restore balance to whatever knocked us off track.

I haven't met a single woman in prison beyond redemption. Even those with the toughest exterior come to the practice with a certain vulnerability -- bringing their fears and insecurities to the mat. Yoga offers a key to opening the heart and finding the center from which to embrace the next chapter. In spite of physical restraints and limitations, we find freedom through the inspiration and transformation that comes from mindfulness and a focused awareness of the condition of mind, body and spirit.

Coming home to our bodies through a compassionate practice, we are free to release shame and guilt that form shadows in the heart and serve no life-giving purpose. Through acceptance and love we create a home -- a relationship with self that may be new and frightening yet full of possibility. I have watched women question their limitations, reevaluate the rules and scripts by which they've lived their lives, and find new answers.

Recently, as we were finishing class, a handful of us talked about challenging poses we hoped to one day accomplish. As some were attempting headstands for the first time, one of the women said, "You know what I've always wished I could do? A cartwheel". I asked what was holding her back and then said, "Let's go, you can do this", -- not exactly a yoga pose but still a physical feat requiring a mind-body connection. She tried and clumsily fell short. She tried again. And again. As the women cheered her on she finally got it! Her eyes filled with tears as she experienced that here in prison in her mid-30s, she was able to transform years of "I can't" to "I did it!". I jumped up and gave her big hug, feeling like a proud mama watching her baby take her first steps. This simple example prompts all of us to ask, "What is our metaphorical cartwheel?"

Through an increase in mindfulness and an awareness of our actions and environment, yoga can help us move beyond self-imposed limitations and regain possession of our true-self. Turning in self-doubt, we receive in exchange an increase in self-confidence and self-control -- helping make better choices, and increasing acceptance and compassion. Yoga, practiced with intent, can rescue us from the distractions and influences that have contributed to our mistakes. One breath, one asana at a time, yoga's power of redemption is changing lives from the inside out.

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