

# Literature Review on Yoga and meditation in prisons<sup>1</sup>

## Revisión de la literatura sobre yoga y meditación en prisiones

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### Abstract

There are testimonies reporting the benefits of yoga and meditation practice in prisons, both from inmates who have accessed these programs and from prison staff and collaborators. However, it is difficult to quantify the true impact of these techniques on the well-being and behavior of inmates, on the one hand due to the inherent dynamics of the penitentiary system, and on the other because many of these effects are subjective and intangible. In this article, I aim to analyze relevant literature critically that examines various yoga and meditation projects in prisons in various parts of the world. Although further research is needed, especially interdisciplinary studies, the reviewed works provide evidence of the feasibility of yoga and meditation programs in prisons, their advantageous cost-benefit ratio, their role in reducing recidivism rates, and the multiple positive effects of these projects on both the prison and broader social environment.

**Keywords:** Prison; Meditation; Yoga; Positive Criminology.

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### Resumen

Existen testimonios que reportan los beneficios de la práctica de Yoga y Meditación en las prisiones, tanto por parte de los internos que han accedido a estos programas como del personal penitenciario y colaboradores. Sin embargo, es difícil cuantificar el verdadero impacto de estas técnicas en el bienestar y el comportamiento de los reclusos, por un lado, debido a las dinámicas inherentes al sistema penitenciario, y por otro porque muchos de estos efectos son subjetivos e intangibles. En este artículo, me propongo analizar críticamente la literatura relevante que examina diversos proyectos de Yoga y Meditación en prisiones de distintas partes del mundo. Aunque se

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requiere de más investigaciones, especialmente estudios interdisciplinarios, los trabajos revisados aportan evidencia sobre la viabilidad de los programas de Yoga y Meditación en contextos carcelarios, su ventajosa relación costo-beneficio, su papel en la reducción de las tasas de reincidencia y los múltiples efectos positivos de estos proyectos tanto en el entorno penitenciario como en la sociedad en general.

**Palabras claves:** Prisión; Meditación; Yoga; Criminología Positiva.

## Introduction

Recently, there has been growing interest in the research of meditation and yoga from different fields such as psychology (Meiste, 2018), neuroscience (Chiesa, 2010; van Lutterveld, 2019; Tang, 2015), education (Weare, 2019), and medicine (Pieczynski, 2020). These studies produce promising findings, as they report, convincing evidence of the benefits of these practices for people's health and overall well-being. Although the mechanisms through which Yoga and Meditation operate have not yet been fully explained, these ancient arts, born in the East several millennia ago, are demonstrating their effectiveness in multiple areas, primarily in the management of anxiety disorders—a silent affliction that causes severe health damage—as well as in support for treatments of depression and posttraumatic stress, in the relief of chronic pain, in recovery support for addicts, and in general health and immunity (Falkenberg, 2018). Yoga essentially means union and is a comprehensive discipline that encompasses all dimensions of the human being. On the surface, its most well-known aspect includes a set of physical and mental techniques, while at a deeper level it also provides guidance for ethical and social behavior in all areas of life. In one of its dimensions, yoga aims at health and well-being—that is, the union and harmony of body and mind—while on a subtler level, its goal is the union of the human being with nature and the spiritual dimension. Yoga consists of eight legs, all of which are important. The first is Yama, the ethical codes, among which perhaps the best known is the principle of non-violence promoted by Gandhi, called Ahimsa in Sanskrit, meaning compassion for all beings. Another limb is Niyama, which refers to personal purification practices.

Asana are physical postures, while Pranayama refers to techniques for managing energy, primarily through breathing. Finally, we find three mental practices: Pratyahara is the control of the senses, Dharana is concentration on a fixed point, and Dhyana is meditation on an object. Some authors call yoga the art of meditation, seeing all these limbs as necessary steps toward achieving meditation, and consider the meditative state to be the goal of all these practices. Meditation consists of bringing attention to the present moment through various techniques. The mind constantly generates thoughts about the past and projects them into the future. Ancient cultures, especially in the East, studied the workings of the mind, which tends to cling to the negative. The mind goes to the past and brings up feelings such as sadness, anguish, shame, nostalgia, and anger; then it goes to the future and produces anxiety, fear, and stress. To meditate is to free oneself from this mental swing and focus on the present moment. There are different

paths to achieving this: some methods are based on breathing, others on bringing attention to the body or to thoughts, and others on sounds or mantras. All these ancient sciences were brought to the West by gurus (which means teachers), mainly from Buddhism and Hinduism. Despite the widespread first skepticism in academic circles, many of these Masters' techniques were gradually adapted in the West and reshaped for modern life, in most cases stripped of the philosophical and spiritual teachings inherent to them. Each year, and with increasing frequency, thousands of new scientific articles are added, studying the effects and mechanisms of action of yoga and meditation in universities and research centers across all continents.

One might think this growing interest is merely a passing trend in peripheral academic circles, but as we shall see later, most of the world's leading universities—including Harvard, Oxford, Stanford, Boston, and many other prestigious institutions—are studying these techniques and their potential therapeutic and educational applications. There are even lines of research aimed at business environments, teamwork, and athletic performance. Prison systems could not remain outside this true revolution.

### **Positive Criminology and the Problem of Recidivism**

Recently, especially through the current of positive psychology led by Martin Seligman—a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and former director of the American Psychological Association—the focus of psychology has shifted from the study of pathological mental states to emphasizing the research of healthy states and how to promote them. This includes the study of positive emotions such as gratitude, curiosity, and awe, as well as human strengths like resilience, optimism, altruism, and creativity. This change in direction within psychology was the origin of positive criminology (which should not be confused with positivist criminology). Positive criminology emphasizes providing holistic responses to crime, considering victims, police forces, and the judicial system, and aiming at the inclusion and reintegration of offenders. It goes beyond the simple idea of punishment and seeks to develop attitudes such as acceptance, compassion, hope, and spirituality so that the individual may desist from the behaviors that led them to prison (Ronel, 2011, 2014). As an example of a penal model that we could call punitive, the United States system stands out: about 1% of its adult population is incarcerated (more than 2 million people), with the highest for each person incarceration rate in the world. In that country, long prison sentences are imposed even for minor offenses, the death penalty exists in most states, part of the prison system is privatized, and despite an annual expenditure of 55 billion dollars on prisons, the recidivism rate is 70% and crime rates are rising—making it the country with the highest crime rate among developed nations (Pereda, 2016).

In the Netherlands, we find the opposite case—a country with an intelligent investment of personnel and resources to treat the problem of criminality in a rational and humanistic manner. They avoid, as much as possible, sending people to prison, offering strong psychological and community support to offenders. Their approach aims at social reintegration and providing tools to prevent recidivism. These programs have been so successful that, despite renting prison space to other countries like Belgium and Norway, the Netherlands has had to close 23 prisons recently. In addition, through their socio-educational programs, they have reduced their already minimal crime rates by 40% (Boztas, 2019). This is not about justifying violence or crime but about understanding

the human being—often with serious problems—behind every offender. Rather than punishing, the focus is on solving issues such as addiction, mental disorders, marginalization, or exclusion, which lead the person to commit the crime. Studies conducted in New Zealand show a high prevalence of inmates with mental illnesses in prisons, which makes the treatment of these disorders a top priority (Brinded, 2001). In Latin American prisons and those of other developing countries, we find prison overcrowding, violence, addiction, and widespread corruption—problems that inevitably spill over into society at large. As I write this, media outlets report more than 300 deaths in Ecuadorian prisons in 2021 alone, due to riots and gang wars (Montenegro, 2021). All that violence eventually pours into society, particularly affecting prison employees, police forces, and penitentiary agents, who are often the most directly affected. It is within the logic of positive criminology that yoga and meditation programs are integrated into prisons, providing inmates with tools to learn to control their minds and emotions, helping to reduce stress and violence, and fostering prosocial behaviors—among other benefits that I will address later (Cooley, 2019). There are very detailed cost-benefit analyses, such as one conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, showing that for every dollar invested in rehabilitation for individuals at high or moderate risk of criminal behavior, the return is 6.31 dollars (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2019; Serrano-Berthet, 2018).

### **Clinical Evidence in a Review from Cambridge**

In a systematic review and meta-analysis published by Katherine M. Auty of the University of Cambridge, this criminologist provides a detailed analysis of much of the published literature on the subject up to that point (Auty et al., 2017). It was the first quantitative meta-analysis conducted on the effects of yoga and meditation programs in prisons, discarding all poorly designed or inadequately formulated studies and applying statistical methods to data analysis. Although she acknowledges the inherent difficulties of conducting research in these environments and the need to deepen and expand the field, she finds a significant relationship between such programs and psychological well-being and quality of life in prisons, as well as a lasting improvement in the behavioral functioning of inmates. One of her findings suggests the effectiveness of long-duration, low-intensity programs compared to shorter, more intensive ones; however, in both cases she finds evidence of considerable progress, particularly among inmates with psychoactive substance abuse problems. She notes that these programs may positively influence recidivism rates, since one of the observed effects is greater adherence by participants to other social rehabilitation programs. This aligns with an Israeli study that links prison yoga programs to lower recidivism rates (Kovalsky, 2020).

Auty's review provides a general summary of the research on yoga and meditation, to find the mechanisms through which they manage to be effective in the hostile context of prison—a particularly stressful environment for most inmates. In this regard, studies stand out that report clinical benefits of these techniques as complementary interventions in the treatment of anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, asthma, and coronary heart disease. Improvements in emotional and effective well-being and a more sustained attention ability among participants in these activities have been reported in prisons. According to Auty, these practices offer holistic health benefits that go beyond mere physical conditioning; their application in the treatment of various diseases is being studied, and they foster compassion, understanding, and the desire for personal

growth—all key factors in the rehabilitation of inmates. While she acknowledges the ongoing controversy over the role of religion and spirituality in prisons, she highlights their importance in such environments and emphasizes that, in the scientific world, spirituality is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor.

As Auty notes, it is important to distinguish religion, the set of books, laws, and institutions, from spirituality, which is a conception of personal development, a search for meaning, and a path of inner peace and tranquility. Prisoners have a lot of time to reflect on the meaning and purpose of their lives, and often, yoga gives them tools to deepen that search. According to qualitative interviews, it has been noted that in some cases they continue the practice of yoga throughout their lives, even outside of prison, which proves that they undergo permanent change. Many prisoners have suffered since childhood sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, poverty, marginalization, and abandonment, as well as all kinds of serious trauma (Schneider, 2011); (Wolff, 2006, 2020); (McGeough, 2018). For example, a study conducted in Uruguay among more than 100 male sexual offenders found that 100 percent had been abused in childhood (Pereyra, 2017). In that sense, yoga and meditation can bring relief, as they have a recognized therapeutic effect in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. In a 2014 Stanford University study, a technique called Sudarshan Kriya was applied to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars who suffered from Posttraumatic stress. After only one week of the course, the symptoms had decreased, and it was also verified that more sustained practice had even greater benefits, especially in controlling anxiety and hyperactivity (Vasudev, 2020). I will expand later the information about Sudarshan Kriya, which has promising effects on post-traumatic stress and other disorders and is widely used in prison programs. Depression, attention deficit disorder, insomnia, hyperactivity, and rumination are other disorders in which yoga and meditation can help. (Davies, 2021). The improvement in attention allows for better follow-up in other courses and parallel studies, increasing the chances of more solid rehabilitation. The shared practice of yoga improves coexistence and the social atmosphere, creating an environment of collaboration and mutual support, which can be vital for these people deprived of liberty and, often, of contact with their families. (Condon, 2019). It is noteworthy in this wide variety of studies, conducted both in Eastern and Western countries, that no adverse or unwanted effects were reported by the participants. Stress decreases, and, as a result, violence decreases.

A solid study by Amy C. Bilderbeck, from the Department of Psychiatry at Oxford, with the intervention of scientists from the University of Coventry and Dutch psychologists, shows a decrease in stress and an improved mood after a 10-week yoga course in prisons in England (Bilderbeck, 2015). In this study, follow-up is done to verify the adherence and individual practice of each participant, and it is found that the more weekly practices, the better the results. In its introduction, it highlights that there is appearing broad evidence of the benefits of yoga programs in prisons, both in terms of physical and mental health, improving mood and well-being, and reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as aggression and violence. These findings support the idea of expanding these projects and continuing their study, since they are ideal for counteracting stress reactivity and extreme aggression, regulating emotions, and improving behavioral control. The researchers noted greater adherence to the practices among older adults than among younger participants. These programs have been tested

in female prison populations (Ferszt, 2015) (Riley, 2019) (Danielly, 2017) and in people of all ages, from adolescents in rehabilitation centers to the elderly (Simpson, 2019). They have an incredibly positive impact on prison programs against drug abuse (Lyons, 2019). It is important to highlight that these programs cover dozens of countries with quite different religions and cultures.

## Methodological framework

This article was crafted through a narrative literature review that zeroes in on the practice of Yoga and Meditation within prison settings. We conducted a thorough search of academic sources and technical documents published over the last twenty years, focusing on systematic reviews, clinical studies, meta-analyses, and documented experiences from various programs around the globe. The literature selection was guided by thematic relevance, methodological quality, and the geographical and cultural diversity of the studies included. We paid special attention to works that explore the impact of these practices on factors like psychological well-being, recidivism, physical health, and prosocial behavior. To enrich our review, we also analyzed institutional initiatives such as the IAHV Prison Program, integrating empirical evidence with real-life testimonials. This approach allowed us to take a critical and interdisciplinary look at the findings, shedding light on both the benefits and the gaps in existing research.

## Results

### **The Prison Program of the International Association for Human Values**

The International Association for Human Values, whose acronym in English is IAHV, has brought, through its Prison Program, Yoga and Meditation courses to more than 700,000 people in prisons in 60 countries on all continents, according to data from its website (IAHV Prison Program, 2021). It is a non-profit organization with educational, charitable, and social functions, associated with Art of Living, the world's largest volunteer-based NGO, which was founded in India under the inspiration of the Hindu Guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Since it is an ecumenical organization, Art of Living has been accepted in almost every country, currently running in more than 150 nations (The Art of Living, 2021). The techniques created by Ravi Shankar and taught through courses by Art of Living are based on the yoga tradition of India and include yoga, meditation, pranayamas, Vedic knowledge, and primarily a technique of rhythmic breathing called Sudarshan Kriya, which is being studied and validated both inside and outside of prisons. There is solid evidence that Sudarshan Kriya has multiple benefits for the health and well-being of those who practice it (Zope, 2013). These techniques, which can be taught in just a few days to large groups at minimal cost, apart from the already known benefits for anxiety and depression (Toschi-Dias, 2017) (Hamilton et al., 2019), also improve the immune system (Kochupillai, 2005), promote endocrine balance (Shiju, 2019), prevent oxidative stress, and data has even been collected showing it slows aging.

The Prison Program brings these courses and techniques, especially Sudarshan Kriya, to prisons through volunteers, both instructors and advanced practitioners who function

as support. They teach courses of approximately 15 hours, in which Sudarshan Kriya is learned and Yoga is practiced, in addition to meditating. Then follow-up is conducted over time, and courses continue to be offered, both for repeat participants and new students, expanding knowledge and securing adherence to the activities, which are daily. Sudarshan Kriya can be practiced individually, and inmates learn to do it independently. In some cases, courses are given to the inmates themselves so they can become monitors or instructors for their peers. This positive experience of turning inmates into yoga Instructors was studied with very satisfactory results in other programs conducted in Oregon, United States (Freeman, 2019) and analyzed in another study by Boston University (Rousseau, 2020). When we discuss a program like Prison that operates in 60 countries with very different cultures, there is a lot of diversity, and each location has its own way of working, but essentially it consists of an active yoga practice, a guided meditation, and finally Sudarshan Kriya—the entire session lasts 2 hours, and during the courses it extends to 3 hours. Often, the course is first given to directors, employees, officials, and prison officers so that they understand and empathize with the activity and can support it.

This is a particular feature of the Prison Program: offering courses and follow-up to security forces and victims of violence. Since the courses drastically reduce violence and improve behavior and coexistence, officials generally support the activity, although there is a considerable degree of instability in the projects, which depend entirely on the volunteers and the decisions of the directors. In general, the expenses of these programs are covered through donations or with money from the volunteers themselves. There is only one study on Sudarshan Kriya in prisons; it was conducted in India and published in the Asian Journal of Psychiatry. It is a clinical study conducted with 230 prisoners with psychiatric disorders, excluding psychosis and bipolarity. The inmates were randomly divided into a group that received the course and six weeks of follow-up and another group that practiced only meditation over the same period. In its conclusions, the study shows that among the prisoners who learned and practiced Sudarshan Kriya, there was improvement in the Global Assessment of Functioning Scale (GAF), less anxiety, fewer symptoms of depression, and better general health, although no significant changes were found in the indexes of vitality and self-control (Sureka, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the activity of the Prison Program in Latin America was transformed into online courses and follow-ups, which continue to be amazingly effective and have reached more prisons at an even lower cost.

## Conclusions

There is growing evidence that yoga and meditation programs in prisons have beneficial effects, both for the health and well-being of inmates and for their social reintegration. These programs improve the prison environment and coexistence within correctional institutions, enhance inmates' adherence to other socio-educational programs, and serve as a driving force for life change. New interdisciplinary studies are needed to maximize the benefits of these programs and to develop more proper practices for each prison reality, with the involvement, among others, of sociologists, legal scholars, and educators. A prison exists within a given social environment; it is bound by laws and political decisions. Within it, clinical, mental health, and medical issues are important—

but among the many studies on the topic, there is a lack of pedagogues, anthropologists, or political philosophers offering their contributions. It is necessary to inform society about the need for reforms in prison systems because everything that happens in prisons eventually spreads into society. Yoga and meditation programs in prisons are generally sustained by volunteers from non-profit associations, who often meet indifference, mistrust, and a lack of cooperation from the authorities. It is necessary to formulate solid projects with teams of broad perspectives and to evaluate and adjust them constantly. In this sense, a well-executed project evaluation is also a tool to expand scientific knowledge and can be a source of the pragmatic understanding so necessary to address the complexity of the penitentiary system.

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