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Yoga helps inmates find calm, gain strength

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ELLSWORTH - With his eyes closed and brow furrowed, Adam Gray lunged into a yoga pose named for a fierce warrior.

He stretched his arms beneath an orange cotton shirt and spread his feet across a green sticky mat. The bright hues were a sharp contrast to the steel-colored paint on the jailhouse walls around him.

"Let's let the ceiling dissolve," his teacher called from the front of the room. "Imagine you are looking at the sky."

The pose, called virabhadrasana in the ancient language of Sanskrit, is designed to give strength in body and spirit, strength to meet challenges and to overcome fears.

For 22-year-old Gray, who is serving jail time on burglary charges, the ancient practice of physical poses and meditation exercises could help him muster the strength he will need to overcome an opiate addiction.

"[Yoga] relaxes me," he said after rolling up his sticky mat at the end of class. "Because a lot of times I think about drugs. It helps take your mind off everything else."

For 4 1/2 years now, there have been weekly yoga sessions for Hancock County Jail inmates. They come voluntarily to a meeting room overlooking State Street, where they spread their mats on the floor and move through the practice that supporters say will help quiet their minds, soothe extreme emotions, curb drug cravings and foster compassion for themselves and others.

"The core of this practice is nonaggression, and that nonaggression begins toward our own bodies," teacher Betsy Duncombe said of the program.

She is a member of Volunteers for Hancock Jail Residents, a nonprofit group that organizes activities for local inmates. Besides yoga, there is instruction in computers, art, creative writing, music and stress reduction.

VHJR founder Judy Garvey said such classes can help those who are incarcerated learn new skills, connect with people in meaningful ways and better express their feelings, which could in turn decrease their chances of returning to jail in the future.

Recidivism rates are high across the country. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that two-thirds of those released from state and federal correctional facilities will be arrested again within three years.

Garvey said introspective programs such as art and yoga allow inmates to reflect on their experiences and assess the direction of their lives rather than waste away the days of their sentences.

"It helps raise the natural human spirit for people on the inside so that they are inclined to live fuller, more productive lives when they come out," she said.

While there are no statistics to show that yoga has helped reduce recidivism at the local jail, there have been national studies on the effect yoga can have on addiction.

That information could prove helpful at the county jail, where 90 percent of the inhabitants suffer substance abuse problems.

A veteran yoga teacher who also is working toward her master's degree in social work, Duncombe said clinical evidence suggests that yoga helps fight drug cravings by stimulating the production of brain chemicals such as serotonin, which make us feel good.

"It's like a natural high, without the damage that drugs do," she said.

Five years ago, she created a similar program at the Maui Community Correctional Center in Hawaii, where small groups of men and women participated in mandatory yoga classes.

At the end of the study period, some said the techniques gave them a greater sense of hopefulness and a better awareness of their emotions.

She also teaches weekly yoga at the Downeast Correctional Facility in Bucks Harbor.

As she sees it, prison is the perfect setting for exploring yoga; it is free of temptation and distraction, and inmates have plenty of time for daily practice.

Nineteen-year-old Justin Horton, who is serving time on burglary charges, said yoga helps him feel calm. During a recent session, the slender teen with a blond buzzcut and tattoos on his biceps participated in sun salutations, twisting poses and three minutes of meditation.

"It relaxes me," he said afterward. "It helps take my mind off this place."

He and Gray said they plan to continue yoga after they are released. There are free classes Tuesday afternoons at St. Francis Church in Blue Hill for adults and youngsters who have spent time in jail, prison or on probation. Their family members also are invited.

At her jailhouse sessions, Duncombe closes with the traditional Sanskrit blessing of "namaste." The word means "I bow to the spirit in all of you."

"It's an idea of equality that we are absolutely on equal grounds as humans," the teacher said, "even if we are inside these prison walls."

"Free Inside" classes are held each Tuesday, 4:30-5:30 pm at St. Francis Church, 19 Hinckley Ridge Rd. Blue Hill

For information, call 207-326-8061 or 374-2437