

# Behind Bars

**In custody, adults and teens learn to stretch, relax, and keep their cool.**

Juan, 59, looks me in the eye, gaze unwavering. I ask him what crime brought him to San Quentin 28 years ago. "Murder."

"That was a violent time for me," he explains. "Today, I advocate nonviolence, no matter what. People here call me a 'sissy.' I don't care about that. I'm not interested in being macho any more. I realize that living as a violent person is a choice. If you choose to be reactive or explosive, it will hurt people."

Juan neither minimizes nor glorifies his crime. He does not shift blame nor deny culpability. He expresses open remorse.

What does Juan credit for his transformation? Yoga. He is not alone in his belief in the powers of yoga. Bay Area yoga teachers are taking their good karma behind bars,

By Jenny P. Andrews  
Photographs by Gates Houpp

and out. Is it warm or cool? Watch your thoughts come and go. Observe them, don't run off with the thoughts. Be in the stillness between the thoughts."

The class closes with a Sanskrit chant: its translation "may the entire universe be filled with peace and joy and love and light." By the students' request, it is repeated twice. Cristina sums up the appeal of the program amid the turmoil of jail, gangs, relationship woes, and missing her children. "Yoga makes you relax. It makes you feel like *not* crying."

Eileen Hirst, chief of staff for Sheriff Hennessey, praises Kludt and the yoga program. "Yoga is becoming really important. It teaches people to deal with stress. They can take that with them when they leave. It gives them a tool for success in the community."

According to *Yoga Journal's* 2005 "Yoga in America" survey, 7.5 percent of U.S. adults, or 16.5 million people, now practice yoga. With its principles of non-violence and non-stealing—and its goal of potential liberation—yoga seems a logical match for the incarcerated.

In another section of the San Francisco jail, yoga is mandatory for prisoners in the award-winning Resolve to Stop the Violence Program (RSVP), a comprehensive program for violent offenders that seeks to heal offenders, family, victims, and the community. A study from Harvard University found that offenders who participated in the RSVP program for more than four months were 80 percent less likely to be re-arrested for a violent crime one year after being released.

## Not for poseurs: Incarcerated teens learn mindfulness

There are things about juvenile hall that make San Quentin seem positively uplifting by comparison. It's bleak to see kids locked up, traveling down the path of neglect or delinquency. When we arrive at the Alameda County Juvenile Hall's "Unit B-2," the teens are doing morning "check in." One by one they stand and state how they are feeling (on a one-to-ten scale) and their goals, things like "get out of here" and "stop flashing on people." Many shift to look at us, new people with notebooks and cameras. Some begin performing with jokes or sarcasm. They are quickly silenced and directed to stand in line with their hands clasped behind them.

Focus is the greatest challenge in the yoga classes. A dozen pairs of eyes and points of attention bounce around the room like exploding popcorn. The teacher, Erin Hill, 30, instructs the class firmly. Her brisk pace and continual instruction—"Extend your right arm up, press your left toes into the mat, gaze just in front of your foot, inhale and feel the belly rise"—leave little time for distraction or interruption. They protest, "This is dorky." "It's okay," she laughs, urging them to "embrace dorkiness." Her relentless enthusiasm wins over their attention. "Notice your heart beating. Listen to the sound of your breathing. Notice what emotion you're feeling—relaxed, agitated? Notice your body sensations in relation to your emotions."

Still, some chuckle, scoff, or just sit down dejectedly and stop participating. But some don't. Some find a sense of relaxation. Some step forward to teach a pose proudly. Some sincerely chant "om, shanti ... peace be unto all beings in the universe."

With funding from the Probation Department and Health Care Services, Niroga Institute offers yoga every weekday morning to the teens housed in B-2, a unit for twelve boys and eight girls. A Niroga study demonstrated that youth participating in yoga had improved self-control and reduced stress.

Niroga founder Bidyut Bose explains. "Yoga is a comprehen-

sive discipline. We use breath to affect state-of-mind and facilitate introspection."

One boy, 18, says he does yoga postures and breathing exercises in his room. "It helps me find a place to relax, to deal with the counselors and peers, just to get through the day. The mornings before court I breathe a lot and do some of the hard poses."

## Camp Glenwood

Incarcerated youths typically spend around 20 days in juvenile halls. With longer stays of six to nine months, detention camps offer opportunities for expanded programs. San Francisco's Mind Body Awareness Project (MBA) connects with up to 300 young people per month in five Bay Area counties, at juvenile halls, detention camps, and aftercare programs. "In a ten-week camp class, we can really build a skill set, a foundation in mindfulness," explains executive director Gabriel Kram.

To observe an MBA class at a boys' detention camp, I carpool with co-teachers Jonathan Weinstock and Gabriel Kram along what Weinstock calls "the best hour commute in the Bay Area." His Prius hugs the cliff and the Pacific rolls out a carpet of sparkling blue. Fifty miles down Highway 1, we turn away from the coast toward La Honda, winding past cows to come upon Camp Glenwood, run by the San Mateo Probation Department. With its square classrooms connected by breezeways, it looks like a typical rural California high school. Passing deer mingle with parked trucks. There is no gate, no fence. Nonetheless, 60 teenage boys, aged 14 to 18, are sentenced to be here by the juvenile courts. If they run away, they face reassignment to a locked facility.

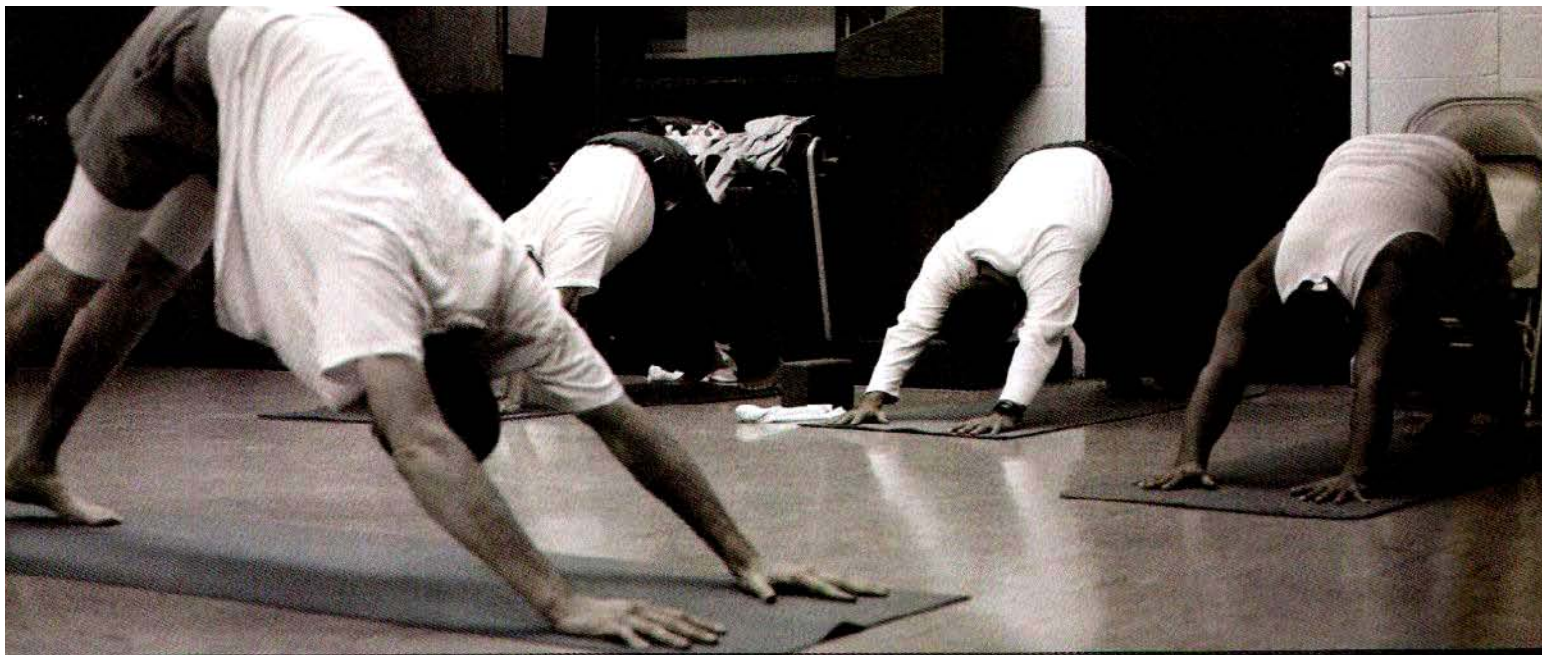
In the classroom, Weinstock and Kram pull several bench couches into a circle. Kram lights incense and the room begins to smell less like the adjoining weight room and more like a Grateful Dead show. Eleven teenage boys enter in a precise line, politely shaking hands with both instructors. Each boy has been selected based on his written letter of interest in the class. Several have done yoga before at Juvenile Hall. A few request specific poses by name. One asks if there will be eye pillows for the relaxation.

At the outset, each boy names the animal he would choose to be on that day. Slouched against the bench cushions with heavy eyelids, one offers "I'd be a tiger because they're 'sick.' They circle their prey before they attack, and that's what I do." Even with the obvious bravado, it is chilling.

Kram leads a series of yoga poses. As the boys balance in eagle and tree, they begin to breathe deeply, audibly. When they resume their seats, they are visibly more awake and relaxed. There is less slumping, less fidgeting. Weinstock introduces the idea of mindfulness. "Pay attention to what's happening right now," he repeats. "Are you hungry, tired, bored?" He reminds them frequently "There are no right answers. Whatever your experience is, it is welcome in this class. You don't have to agree with everyone, just give mutual respect to each other."

The yoga and meditation tap into something sincere. At the end of the class, when queried about issues he hopes to address, the boy who idolized the predatory tiger quietly responds "to control my anger." It's a common response. Other top contenders include "clear my head," "relax all the nervousness," "focus better," and "sleep better." Unlike the opening circle, there are no chuckles and no jeers.

David [not his real name], 18, explains why he has returned to assist in the class after taking the last session. "When I was in the



**Yoga gives me a moment-to-moment focus. In this environment of darkness and negativity, it gives you a clarity and peace that is unparalleled. —Rusty, “lifer” at San Quentin**

class, when I got mad, I could just sit by myself and think. Before, I would cuss and try to fight.”

“Not to be too new agy,” says Kram, his unruly curls bouncing into his face as he sips green tea from a mason jar, “but you take these tools of movement and meditation to people who need it, and it can transform their reality.”

Kram’s current gig as MBA director and teacher is a long way from dropping out of a neurobiology program at Yale to go through his own “massive rebellion,” during which he says “meditation was one of the things that kept me alive.” This story arc is familiar: MBA founder Noah Levine chronicles his own path from Santa Cruz street punk junkie to meditation teacher in his roller coaster of a memoir, *Dharma Punx*. From idealistic beginnings, the MBA Project has grown to employ nine teachers, with funding from private foundations and individual donors.

I come home from Camp Glenwood to find the spare tire stolen from my car, in front of my house. I read that crime is up 29 percent in my neighborhood. Not too long ago, a dozen middle school kids swarmed and beat a businessman walking down my block toward BART, taking photos with cell phones and boastfully posting the beating on the internet. Will yoga somehow change all this?

A 2005 study of participants in MBA mindfulness classes showed measurable improvement in stress levels, self-control, and tendency to respond with anger to provocative situations. Though more research is needed, a study of Camp Glenwood mindfulness participants suggested a reduced number of individuals who received a new sustained felony charge after release from camp.

“David” will be released in two weeks, back to living “on the outs” as they say at Camp Glenwood. He’s adamant that yoga will help him stay out of trouble. “When I want to do a crime, I just try to relax. I take a deep breath to relax and try to just chill. I think about the consequences.” Hopefully he’ll never be in the San Quentin yoga class. **B**

## How to help...

For more information about local programs offering yoga to inmates, or to make a donation of your time or money, contact these organizations:

**Insight Prison Project** currently offers 18 classes per week for 300 San Quentin inmates, including violence prevention, victim-offender dialogues, substance abuse, and yoga. IPP seeks additional funding, and plans to double its programming to reach 800 inmates per week. 805 Fourth St., Suite 3, San Rafael, CA 94901, 415-459-9800, [InsightPrisonProject.org](http://InsightPrisonProject.org).

**Niroga Institute** trains and coordinates a pool of yoga teachers to teach therapeutic yoga at juvenile halls, cancer centers, and programs for at-risk youth and other underserved populations. 3101 Arizona St., Oakland, CA 94602, 510-883-1250, [niroga.org](http://niroga.org).

**Mind Body Awareness Project** teaches mindfulness to teens at juvenile halls, camps, and aftercare programs throughout the Bay Area. 3001 19th St., 2nd Floor, San Francisco, CA 94110, 415-824-2048, [mbaproject.org](http://mbaproject.org).

**Community Works** is the service provider for the RSVP program at the San Francisco jail, as well as an extensive jail arts program and additional yoga classes for inmates. 1605 Bonita Ave., Berkeley, CA 94709, 510-486-2340, [community-works-ca.org](http://community-works-ca.org).

**San Francisco Sherriff’s Department** oversees all jail programming, including yoga, substance abuse, arts, and vocational training. Room 456, City Hall, 1 Dr. Carlton Goodlett Pl., San Francisco, CA 94102, [sfsheriff.com](http://sfsheriff.com).