

Art and the Eight Limbs

How and why The Art of Yoga Project uses creative expression with incarcerated teen girls.

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Introduction. Introspection. Integration. Inspiration. These are the 4 seasonal components of The Art of Yoga Project's (AYP) Yoga and Creative Arts Curriculum. Over 500 incarcerated girls a year in three California detention centers receive this program as part of their rehabilitation, sometimes up to 4 days per week.

Why Art and Yoga?

"Your program offers girls their full humanity" wrote author Margaret Scott, after learning about AYP. We believe this is due to AYP's innovative weaving of creativity into the yoga experience, because art is uniquely human. No other living creature uses art to express. Art is a human being's attempt to connect with a part of themselves and reflect it out in some medium whether in a statue, a painting, a poem or a song.

Isn't yoga in itself an art? Absolutely. And that's why expressive arts are a perfect complement to enhance a timeless practice—the healing art of yoga. Yoga and art are a natural link. Yoga is the conscious effort to connect with life. Art is the human being's creative effort to reflect that experience of life. Basically, our bodies have a natural alignment with life and what's needed for life. And thousands of times a day with our breath and other systems, we expel what doesn't serve us well. That natural process goes on with out our conscious awareness. Yoga uses breath to "re-mind" ourselves of the natural alignment our body has with living. And yoga connects us with the best part of ourselves, our divine nature. From that place, creativity flows. We're most aligned with "Creator" in the creative process.

Girls in Juvenile Hall

Teen girls in juvenile hall critically need the healing yoga and art can bring. They are 12-18 years old--still developing--have histories of severe trauma, and are up against every challenge imaginable.

"The 'average' girl on probation today is coping with intergenerational abuse and neglect, substance abuse, mental illness, gang involvement, lack of educational opportunity, and poverty" reports the handbook from Margartet J. Kemp Camp for Girls, one of the programs we serve at The Art of Yoga Project.

Why does this curriculum work for girls? Artistic expression gives young women a voice. They can write, paint or draw about feelings and convictions instead of acting out with high-risk, self-destructive behaviors. Many of the girls are cutters, with scars on their arms and legs and places we can't see. We hope that instead of self-harm, they will learn to go to their journals or canvases to feel alive, to express themselves, and release. And

using the yoga practice first can really set the conditions for the girls to process traumas through artistic venues.

Alexandra Rutherford, AYP Creative Writing Educator, says: *“The method is a holistic one. It’s a therapeutic approach that not only addresses issues residing in the girls bodies (physical places of anxiety or trauma), but once the girls open on a physical level it creates the space for them to be open on an emotional and artistic level.*

I also feel that the stress of being incarcerated causes the girls to come to the session with all sorts of stuff built up. When they come to class, they start with the practice before going into writing. I feel like this allows them to shed some of the anxiety and tension with which they may have entered.”

Through learning the 8 limbs of yoga with AYP, the girls are chipping away at their past conditioning which, like for most of us, is pretty intense. These girls are tough. They are from violent gang communities and they often have misperceptions about yoga. Some of the girls have told us that they thought yoga was for rich, skinny, white women and not for them. We let them know that yoga is for everyone. One girl told us:

I thought it was really weird, freaky. When I first came in here, I thought, ‘what is this...what the h--?!’ And I was real shocked like when someone first touched me for an adjustment and I thought, ‘What is this?’ But then I saw that it was okay and I got to where I was real relaxed in final svasana and everything...You get used to it. It calms me down. (Incidentally, this young woman now teaches yoga AND meditation to her 12 year old sister!)

The girls are taken off guard at first as the vigorous asana practice and quiet meditation strips away their bravado and leaves them connected to the best part of themselves and each other. From this place they connect more authentically, with each other and through their art. An atmosphere for authentic sharing is enhanced, expanding the opportunity for reaching girls on a deeper level. Yoga serves to ground and center them. Art gives them a vehicle for processing emotions and thoughts in a circle of peers and supportive women.

The Art of Yoga Project Art Therapist, Anne Garrett, writes *“Yoga inherently connects us to our bodies. It requires that we focus on sensations, thoughts, and feelings that are all contained in the body, and in who we are. We find tight places, looser places, challenges in our poses which can translate to metaphors in our lives. We can connect to ourselves in the same way through art and self expression. When we create art authentically, there is a dis-covering or un-covering that takes place. We get to really see and hear ourselves...we become a witness and active participant in our development, all the while supported and validated in a group setting.”*

The Art of Yoga Project Method

We believe the strength of our program has a lot to do with the structure and ritual we impose for each class. The AYP staff (Site Director, yoga teachers and artist, art therapist and/or writing educator) is a cohesive group of strong, compassionate and dedicated

individuals who model service and purposeful connection among women versus competition. On class days, we first receive updates from facility staff so we can determine the best placement for the girls during our session. We then set the space with a sort of “secular altar” using flowers, herbs, beautiful linens, eye-pillows and peaceful images. Our hope is to bring focus, ritual, beauty and a relationship with nature into their lives.

We then gather in a circle to ground ourselves before the girls enter. We set our intention and pray for assistance in best serving the girls. When the students come in, they are asked to remove their shoes and one by one find their mat labeled with their name. Each of the AYP staff bows to the girls to let her know she is important. To let her know she matters. Once everyone is seated, we have an inspirational reading and a short meditation. Then we have a check-in question ranging from “ Please say one word for how you are feeling emotionally” to “Who most inspires you in your life and why?” The question is related to the theme for the day which corresponds to the seasonal curriculum.

After the check-in, the Lead Teacher presents the theme and facilitates a discussion. Next we move into a fairly vigorous asana practice with integrated pranayama. During svasana, AYP staff do an adjustment for each girl who gives consent, following the guidelines from our training on “Teaching Yoga to At-risk Teen Girls.” We are careful to recognize when a girl has had a triggering response to her past trauma and we respond accordingly. This is also a transition time when some staff set up art materials while another leads a guided meditation to bring them into the art or writing activity. When the girls emerge from their rest, they are then led directly into the art for the day. During the creative time, AYP staff support the girls with gentle instruction and lots of encouragement. Finally, we close in circle with a sharing as a check-out. Often we assign a homework assignment for the next week and we read a passage to close.

Each class is two-hours long with one half each dedicated to yoga practice and creative expression. This two-hour “theory intensive” is usually at the beginning of the week and is reinforced with one to three additional one-hour Yoga and Reflective Writing classes per week.

Our classes are fully integrated into the rehabilitation program in the county facilities where we teach. Since the girls in juvenile hall attend school, our program often complements their curriculum. One facility staff remarks:

“As a teacher up at Juvenile Hall I am there first hand to see the transformation of the students who may come in sad, depressed, and angry, and after a class of yoga and reflective writing leave with a smile on their face, and a piece of artwork that can later remind them of their inner power. We have many programs up at the JJC, but AYP is by far the most inclusive and empowering of them all! __Thank you ALL for being kind, compassionate, and brave! __ Matthew Lacques_ SPED. Instructor_ WLC, JJC”

The Art of Yoga Project’s Yoga and Creative Arts Curriculum

The Yoga and Creative Arts Curriculum's outline of themes and art mediums are categorized seasonally in order to connect girls with the natural world.

Fall *Introduction*

In the Fall, we *introduce* the concept of yoga to the girls. We draw them in by explaining yoga's benefits and we even list off all of the celebrities who pay top dollar to do yoga. We play rockin' music and try to make it fun. We admit we are attempting to impress the girls and get them hooked! This is essential for teens and to get the leaders—girls who have authority in the group---engaged. We begin building the girls' strength and flexibility with basic asanas. Yoga theory is discussed including history, purpose and Patanjali's Eight Limbs. We use a felt-board tree of yoga to "build" the tree each week. The art component is comprised of visual arts, in which girls work independently on projects such as affirmation collages, life-size body mapping, mandalas, mosaic, and self-portraiture to begin a process of self awareness and self knowledge.

In special sessions dedicated to Body-Image and Nutrition, Yoga for Women, and Setting Intention, we ask the girls to take a look at their inner dialogue and ask themselves questions like:

- "What do I say to myself when I look in the mirror?"
- "What are my strengths as a woman?"
- "How can I stay true to my goals?"
- "How can I stay centered in a challenging world?" and
- "How can I make choices that nurture my well-being?"

Often we have a featured artist for the week like Frida Kahlo or Alexander Calder. At AYP, we work hard to find balance between the educational and experiential aspects of the art component. Given this population, we lean toward the experiential, wishing to give girls the peace and healing they need.

Winter *Introspection*

The Winter Curriculum introduces the girls to the Yamas and Niyamas through journaling and creative writing, including song-writing and collective poetry. The girls are led down the path of personal discipline, including non-stealing, non-violence, personal hygiene, integrity of word and action, and sexual mindfulness. They are asked to reflect on these tenets and their own lives. For instance, we study Asteya and ask them to consider how they are stealing from their own potential. When we study Ishvara Pranidhana, we ask them to contemplate their own devotions and better tolerate those of others. Since these concepts can sometimes be dry to a teenager, we engage them through a fun contest in which the girls team up to produce their own illustrated slogans for each of the 10 yoga guidelines. "Don't be greedy, help the needy" for Aparigraha and "Tell the truth or live a lie" for Satya are a few of the winners.

The girls also compile their writing into a “Yamazine” and hold a Poetry Slam for family, counselors and probation staff at the close of the session. Last fall, the Poetry Slam at the Muriel Wright Center (another facility we serve) was held during a difficult time. One of the girls had gone AWOL (absent with out leave) and was killed on the streets of Oakland. The girls at the Wright Center dedicated their evening to her and read one of her poems. It was poignant and powerful for them to express themselves this way.

Alexandra Rutherford writes about the evening:

“They did a yoga demonstration and lobbied to use some songs that T. enjoyed and dedicated the practice to her. They appeared empowered and free, it was as though they were sending her spirit on to a better place with all the love and gentleness that could have been conjured.”

Each of the girls also chose to thank the AYP staff for helping them. One girl gave us this poem:

How Many Times

*How many times can I say thank you.
For showing me a gift that's powerful
A gift of peace
I can truly blame you for all the wonderful
things I have learned. You are one of a kind. As soon as I walk through
those doors, I can feel this wonderful vibe of kindness and peace. It's a marvelous
feeling that I can't feel anywhere else. All of your kindness fills the entire room
like a perfume. When you speak your words echo threw my ears like a lovely
song. When we do the poses it's like you can read my mind. I never knew how
to feel peace....Till I met you. Thank you, R.*

AYP Creative Writing Educator, Terri Lobdell, comments on the introspective journey of the Winter Curriculum:

"Yoga helps center, relax and empower the girls so they feel safe, open and prepared for creative writing activities. Creative writing helps the girls understand better their emotions, their world and their place in it. When they read their writing out loud to the group, they hear the integrity and power of their own voices, often for the first time. They learn how it feels to have their own words and stories honored and received as important and beautiful. Combining yoga and creativity in one program is a powerful tool for healing and building self-esteem. Huge life changes become possible for someone who believes in the worth of her own words. This is hard to measure but it can be felt and seen as the girls learn to express themselves more and more freely and deeply with each session."

Spring Integration

The Spring Curriculum explores the final limbs of Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi integrating them into the girls' deepening study and practice of yoga. We move on to more complex breathing techniques which prove very beneficial for girls' self-control. The teens also learn more about concentration and meditation, and begin some asana partner work (if appropriate). Then the girls take the concepts they've learned thus far and make art together, practicing "unity in diversity." They learn about friendships, respect, team-building, tolerance and the importance of making productive contributions to the community. The group art projects include a mural of the tree of yoga, a community quilt, key sculpture, mandala art, puzzle painting and a combined photography project.

To see girls from opposing gangs peacefully painting the names of the Niyamas on the trunk of a tree together is powerful. This year the Spring Curriculum culminated in a beautiful labyrinth ceremony and curated art show.

When asked what they learned in our Spring Curriculum, girls responded with:

"I learned that everyone has a different and unique view."

"Sisterhood"

"Everyone is an artist"

"Team work"

"I can meditate when I'm feeling low"

"How to breathe and take it slow"

"When I am crying, I use my breathing techniques"

Summer Inspiration

The Summer Curriculum addresses the truth that there are many aspects of creativity. In the "Inspiration" session the focus is on art and performance, with the goal of helping the young women develop the skills to create a multimedia piece that they present to family, friends, and staff at the end of the six to eight-week program.

Dancer and AYP Improvisational Theater Instructor Janice Brody writes:

"Based on the premise that true creativity lies in discovering and honoring one's own voice, the summer program will give the young women the necessary tools to find their voices and tell their stories through spoken word, movement, music, and art... They will experience the fun and excitement of creative discovery, the challenge of transforming that discovery into art, and the sense of mastery and increased self-confidence that come from having created something of value. Through art, many will discover new and productive ways of addressing the ideas, feelings, and concerns that are most important in their lives. Working together, they will develop a greater spirit of cooperation and learn how to cope more positively with mistakes, leading to a more nimble and responsive engagement with life."

A New Identity

For some girls, the art and yoga curriculum connects them to better times. M. who is just 16 now, says “*It brings me back to when I was a little kid, and I had no issues but playing and having fun.*” For others, it is a respite “*The art projects were fun and expressive. My way of meditating.*” And “*art activities can bring positive feelings in your thoughts instead of always thinking about the bad ones.*”

Some girls are surprised at their abilities: *I didn't know I was able to create great art.* And finally, for many girls the program grants a young woman a much needed new identity. Instead of her internalized labels of “troubled,” “at-risk,” or “bad” every girl has the opportunity to become “an athlete,” “a yogini,” “an artist,” and “a writer.” Each young woman carries this new, positive identity into her future, enabling her to create better choices for herself. The Art of Yoga Project hopes to help girls foster these new identities while still embracing their true essence and making peace with their past.

Anne Garrett says it well:

“No matter where we are in our lives, be it on our mats, in our drawings, or in our poetry, we encourage the girls to be who they are...to accept and embrace their journey. Yoga and art give us a safe container to be real.”