

Out of Hell and Beyond

“You will never amount to anything you little bastard,” my mother’s words shrieked and echoed off the walls. The sound reverberated between my small little ears. Normal chatter at home on any given day, and stagnantly stunting emotionally for me between the ages of three to eighteen. Freedom came not early enough, but through yoga, meditation and counseling there is light beyond my hell.

Somewhere in all the chaotic years of my growing up, looking back I notice my heart accelerating, I get a heightened sense of self-preservation, and it feels as if my world is about ready to explode its guts out into the sidewalk of the neighborhood. This is what medical researchers and doctors call post-traumatic stress disorder. As with most mental health problems, PTSD is probably caused by a complex mix of Stressful experiences, including the amount and severity of trauma you’ve gone through in your life. Inherited mental health risks, such as a family history of anxiety and depression. The American Psychiatric Association, defined PTSD as, “Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury.”¹

My cognitive early memory is one of chaos, confusion, emotional/physical/sexual abuse, constant fighting between parents, having to pick sides between parents. Then having to learn that even more threats of violence upon me, if I ever told anyone what happened inside the house. We were beaten down verbally mostly by our father out of manipulation and predator traits, and more so of just embarrassment of the image my mother was portraying to others outside our home. We lived in a very rural isolated and less dense housing/neighborhood. We tended to play games outside by ourselves, as we did not have any friends our age nearby to socialize with. I was forced by my father to take nightly showers with him up till the age of 10. I have very vivid memories of going into the shower and coming out of the shower. I have absolutely no memories of those 10 years of what took place inside the shower. Many others over time have experienced the same trauma which affects them sometimes for the rest of their lives.²

The start of the Prison Yoga Project 200 RYT Teachers’ training began with us having to take our ACE score³. ACE stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences.⁴ In my personal experience growing up in a dysfunctional abusive family taught me to self-isolate and never talk in public

¹ <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>

² <https://bit.ly/CampAbuses1950>

³ <https://bit.ly/ACE-scoring>

⁴ <https://www.safersociety.org/adverse-childhood-experiences/>

about the abuses. This toxic environment played out as in the image in red below. Childhood trauma will cause a lifetime of issues⁵ unless one seeks healing.

Never in my 59 years of behavioral health have I dared open those wounds from my childhood. I was now faced with the sudden truth from our classes, (Yoga, Social Justice, and Leadership: a 200-Hour Yoga Teacher Training⁶) that as a teacher in training for Yoga, we are our first client by digging in and experimenting with the concepts and ideas of a deeper dive into yoga.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Ten categories of childhood trauma, or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were identified in a research study conducted by Kaiser Permanente, a managed care consortium, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a federal agency of the US Dept. of Health and Human Services.

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Parental Incarceration

The Consequences of ACEs

ACEs → Early death
Disease, disability and social problems
Adoption of health-risk behaviors
Cognitive, social & emotional impairment

The more Adverse Childhood Experiences a person experiences as a child, the more likely he or she will suffer from poor health outcomes as an adult.

Toxic Stress As Trauma
Persistent fear and anxiety can affect young children's learning and development and change brain architecture.
Scientists now know that chronic, unrelenting stress in early childhood--caused, for example, by abrupt separation from caregivers, extreme poverty, or parental depression--can be toxic to the developing brain in the same way that repeated abuse and witnessing violence changes brain architecture.

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<https://www.saferociety.org/adverse-childhood-experiences/> (image above from Safer Society Foundation)

⁵ <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>

⁶ <https://bit.ly/PYP200hrYTT>

The Consequences of ACEs



As an information geek, I am very adept at online research, website coding, and marketing, as I learned this through my years as an artistic director for an Indigenous theatre company and the music business. When the internet hit, I was like right there on top of it. Using my skills, talent, and knowledge, to assist the growth of other artists. I prepared PowerPoint presentations on how to use the internet for artists' promotions. I am very good at this medium, as well as the years in studios and radio, with audio and video editing.

I quickly put up a website for my yoga classes to promote while I was taking the class. It was fast, precise, and marketable.

However, during each module of the class assignments, my further understanding of the yoga philosophy, methodology, and the use of physical energy to do yoga and meditation sets began to awaken me to a deeper truth. I was controlling, manipulating, and designing the aspects of what I would do with my training, instead of letting go and letting the universe unfold my future for me.

This was quite a shock to me in how I was responding naturally, organically, and aesthetically to the class materials as I used to just control them all by myself. Again part of my trauma of childhood taught me the self-survival mode, and positive public appearances while burying the pain and trauma of my childhood.

Our Prison Yoga Project (PYP) class is mostly counselors, advocates, ombudspersons, and even some former inmates, who believe in the social justice approach to Yoga training. It relies heavily upon the trauma-informed method along with a very open-minded approach to the teachings. Rather than having a "guru" based on yoga lineage, our class materials were more open-ended with no trappings that lead to abuses. I mean the whole Eastern thought of spirituality is that we alone, ourselves, create and live and heal through the karma of this life and any previous ones. That is not a hard concept for me, as I've formerly been an Eastern Orthodox deacon, receiving Eastern Theology in two different seminaries. And as a current Sikh, I realize my purpose in this life is to reconnect with the Divine, or as Sikhs say, Ek Ong

Kar. One God. No matter what the religion may be, as a Sikh, I see the divine creator as One, not many gods. Pretty much the same underlying message once you get into your Eastern seminary studies by critical analysis of ancient texts. All of our many cultures and mythology are egocentric. Yet the basic truths are very similar in all religions. It comes down to basically how I will live my life according to my cultural identity and beliefs. It's a personal journey, just as my teacher training was designed.

A personality or "guru" lineage yoga system can easily fall into a pit of abuse and trauma. While I was incarcerated in the early 1900s at Folsom State Prison, I took part in any self-help or meditation-based program offered. One such program, and one I did learn a lot from, is the SYDA Yoga Prison Project⁷ (SYPP), Hatha Yoga based. It consisted of a monthly correspondence course, and as being in California, the SYPP volunteers came monthly for an in-class yoga meditation program. We were instructed through the guidance at that time of John Friend. After my parole, I was able to spend some quality time with him in South Fallsburg, New York. He left SYDA to begin his new project, Anusara Yoga. In time, he succumbed to some of his issues which rocked the yoga community.⁸ While John remains a person I am thankful for and still consider a friend, in no way am I pointing the finger at him. I am only expressing my view on how PYP teaches yoga and helps prevent any continued trauma or accessible issues. The wonderful volunteers at SYPP have saved and redeemed many incarcerated persons. So for that, I am thankful. Further research into SYDA history, there again abuses that led to trauma by Swami Muktananda.⁹ As well during the period of my own non-profit, Dharma Seeds, I produced for ten years a meditation-based newspaper sent to over 3000 state and federal inmates. I used a lot of material already written and received reprint permissions. I had met a new yogi on the scene, Yogi Nithyananda who recently came to the Americas to promote his system of yoga. He too got caught up in abuses as well.

¹⁰

I think one of the best quotes about what it means to be a yoga teacher, I found online.

It is very important to drive home the point that physical ability does not equal inner peace and that the power structure of teacher and student can become a dangerous power dynamic. As teachers, we need to remember to stay humble and realize we are merely imparting teachings and skill sets, we are not all-mighty healers, we are space creators where people can come to learn about themselves and take care of their needs through agency and self-empowerment.

It is the role of a teacher, not to become the know-it-all, or the guru, or the healer. Simply our role is to create space for healing through the ancient art of yoga and yoga philosophy. Honoring the individual who arrives for class the freedom to chart their journey with yoga.

⁷ <https://www.siddhayoga.org/syda-foundation/prison-project>

⁸ <https://bit.ly/JohnFriendOpensUp>

⁹ <https://selfdefinition.org/frauds/The-Secret-Life-of-Swami-Muktananda.pdf>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nithyananda#Controversies_and_allegations

While I make no judgment or condemnation of past yogis and their abuses, what I point out is simply yoga is a spiritual system of awakening to life's mysteries. It should not be contingent upon one person, one lineage, or one style. Yoga must become trauma-informed and accessible to all walks of life so true healing can come.

One may ask what is exactly trauma-informed yoga? “A trauma-based approach to yoga makes the practice safer and more accessible, addressing the unique needs of trauma survivors”, as stated by PyschCentral.¹¹ Accessible yoga opens up the healing to the most vulnerable and most underrepresented within the current yoga community. The Accessible Yoga Association (AYA) mission states, “Accessible Yoga believes that all people—regardless of ability or background—deserve equal access to yoga. Through education and advocacy, we share the teachings and benefits of yoga with those who have been marginalized.”

¹²

PYP taught how to establish a welcome space for all to participate within.

The path of healing-centered yoga, while being an opportunity to connect within oneself, is also an opportunity to explore our connection with others. Our commitment to mitigating the effects of suffering is rooted deeply in social justice. As we explore the practice of yoga, we will discuss race and ethnicity, sexuality and gender identity, ableism, ageism, socio-economic populations, body design, and religion, and how oppression, assumption, violence, and ignorance contribute to continued suffering. We will also discuss personal and generational trauma and the mental and physical impact of these traumas. Whether violations against humanity have directly impacted you, witnessed by you, or you are just beginning to build your awareness, your unique experience sits within you. These experiences can profoundly affect your mind and body. You may notice that even reading this passage evokes emotion within you.

Our initial first lessons included truths on how we carry our history and experiences with us every day.

For those who have lived with abuse, neglect, discrimination, food insecurity, disrupted or unstable home life, or an overwhelming variety of other significant potentially traumatizing experiences, these experiences may settle within our bodies and alter our ability to connect with our past, present, and future. As we push forth into survival mode, they tend to grow stronger, overtaking “us” from within ourselves.

The 17 modules span over five months of weekly classes and lessons. I noticed a profound shift in my being. I was learning to apply the ancient yoga philosophy and methodology in a trauma-informed and accessible environment. When you present yoga in this manner, true healing happens quicker, easier, and more profoundly. I appreciate that PYP presents its

¹¹ <https://psychcentral.com/health/what-is-trauma-informed-yoga>

¹² <https://accessibleyoga.org/about-us/>

material in a manner of showcasing all styles of yoga while allowing the individual to choose which path is right for them. I tried Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan, but it was not as helpful as Hatha Yoga has been for me. I also was introduced to KY as taught by YB, during the time horrific accusations of abuse shocked the yoga community again.

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Prison Yoga Project's yoga teachers' classes are redefining the yoga industry.

The commercialization and marketing of yoga and its portrayal in social media have warped it into a practice that works against what yoga authentically intends to offer. In the mainstream Western paradigm, it has become an exercise-oriented practice that emphasizes flexibility which wealthy, white women pursue. A survey of who practices yoga done in 2016 by the Yoga Alliance and Yoga Journal, two organizations that we might rightly call out for creating this situation, captures this narrowing of what yoga is and who practices it.

This unfortunate situation influences people's reluctance to explore the practice. The commercialization can make yoga seem inaccessible to people who cannot afford to pay for it. The preconceptions formed can create soft barriers; "I'm too old," "I'm not flexible," "Yoga's for women," "I'm too fat," or "I don't see anyone who looks like me."

By embracing the 8 Limbs of Yoga, understanding the components that comprise teaching yoga, I found my path of self-healing. I learned how to see myself, see others and learn to listen and learn. Something that had escaped my mental mind by the trauma I suffered as a child and buried for years. This class helped me to unravel that past, use the knowledge I had learned and practice the art of yoga by placing all ten toes upon the yoga mat. Being a teacher is not about book knowledge or academic understanding. Rather it is a personal discovery that only I can do if I participate in yoga and meditation. I can't teach what I have not opened myself up to learn.

Yoga and my yoga teaching class helped me move out of my hell and beyond to a more loving lifestyle and soul. I am appreciative of the healing qualities of yoga. I am more grateful now for understanding the wide field of expressions of yoga. I am thankful as well, as I continue my healing, I can be the teacher creating space for healing.

This inquiry-based, 200-hour online yoga teacher training included live lectures and discussions, postural training workshops, and self-guided learning modules. It provided me with an in-depth understanding of the practice of yoga and the skills to support others' personal and collective healing. This program emphasizes offering yoga in an accessible way to all students in studio and non-studio settings to create access for a diverse spectrum of people. PYP's goal with this training is to further the diversification of yoga teachers offering this practice to underrepresented populations to increase access to this healing practice for all. A very noble endeavor, that has and continues to circle the globe with its graduates

¹³ <https://archive.org/details/sikh-bulletin-sep-oct-2010>

teaching trauma-informed accessible yoga either to those presently incarcerated or to the public at large.

Any current incarcerated person, can write to Prison Yoga Project for free Yoga books, and correspondence to support their yoga practice. Prison Yoga Project, P.O. Box 415, Bolinas, CA 94924.

Deva Hardeep Singh is an Oklahoman, a Yuchi Indian, enrolled in the Muscogee Nation, studied radio/TV/film in college. He's worked as an on-air personality, author, poet, artist, an administrative assistant, petroleum landman, barista, staff writer, paralegal, concert promoter, music artist manager, content producer and graphic designer. He spent 6 months as a National Data Team volunteer for the Bernie Sanders for President campaign. He is a freelance journalist with International papers and magazines with a social justice focus. He's been a Zen meditator for over 30 years, teaches meditation from the Chan school of Buddhism, is a Reiki III master, and will soon provide yoga instruction free of charge to those seeking healing from trauma.

