

Beyond forgiveness: Healing after the hurt

# Ode

TO PEOPLE TO PASSION TO POSSIBILITIES

Taking yoga  
to the streets

Can Tata,  
India's largest  
company,  
export caring  
capitalism?

New life for  
old tires



# KAPOW!

From the  
boardroom to the  
shopping mall,  
"new activists"  
are giving the  
status quo a swift  
kick in the pants

PLUS

How we put skepticism  
aside and fell for  
biodynamic farming

WWW.ODEMAGAZINE.COM  
\$4.95 U.S. / \$4.95 CANADA  
MAY 2008 VOL. 6 ISSUE 4



PRO RADIATION! PAGE 70

# STRETCHING THEMSELVES TO THE LIMIT

THE NIROGA INSTITUTE BRINGS THE  
BENEFITS OF YOGA TO MINORITY AND  
AT-RISK COMMUNITIES. BY JOSEY DUNCAN

**DRESSED ALIKE IN LOOSE GREY PANTS,** blue T-shirts and dark navy sweatshirts, a group of teenagers files into the bright room. They remove their shoes and sit on the identical green mats arranged in two rows on the floor. Once they're seated, Annika Hanson, their teacher, asks for silence. A few kids, ignoring her, keep laughing and talking. Eventually, one speaks up. "Just go ahead and be quiet." Then amid minimal noise, Hanson leads them in chanting "om." Yoga class has begun.

It's Monday morning in Unit 3 of the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro, California, where they hold yoga classes in two units five days a week. A weekly class is also offered to staff. Yoga is supposed to help the teens relax in this extremely stressful environment. It's also meant to help improve their lives after they're released.

Yoga is practised around the world, and is incredibly popular in the West because of its mental and physical health benefits. But yoga classes are inaccessible and often unknown to many populations. You're more likely to find a yoga studio in a predominantly white, wealthy area than in a minority community. That's where the Oakland, California-based Niroga Institute comes in.

In addition to the classes at Juvenile Hall, where Hanson is the program manager, the organization teaches yoga to seniors, cancer patients and survivors; people in rehab; at-risk and incarcerated youth—people who perhaps need yoga the most, but often have the least access to it.

Niroga's Integral Health Fellowships program kicked off last summer. This initiative is designed to train African-American applicants to become yoga instructors. They spend two years developing their practises, learning about the philosophy of yoga and preparing to teach. Then they're expected to "pay it forward" and teach in traditionally underserved communities.

"Black people need yoga," says Ian Jerome Mair, an Integral Health fellows adviser originally from Jamaica who has been practising yoga for more than 30 years, in mostly white classes. "Health statistics show that African-Americans are at the bottom. We need yoga for health. Does a person being black necessarily make them the best teacher for a black person? In a society like this, where black role models are desperately needed, I think so."

**ON THE GREEN MATS IN UNIT 3, HANSON** reminds her students to breathe. She asks one boy in the corner of the room to lead

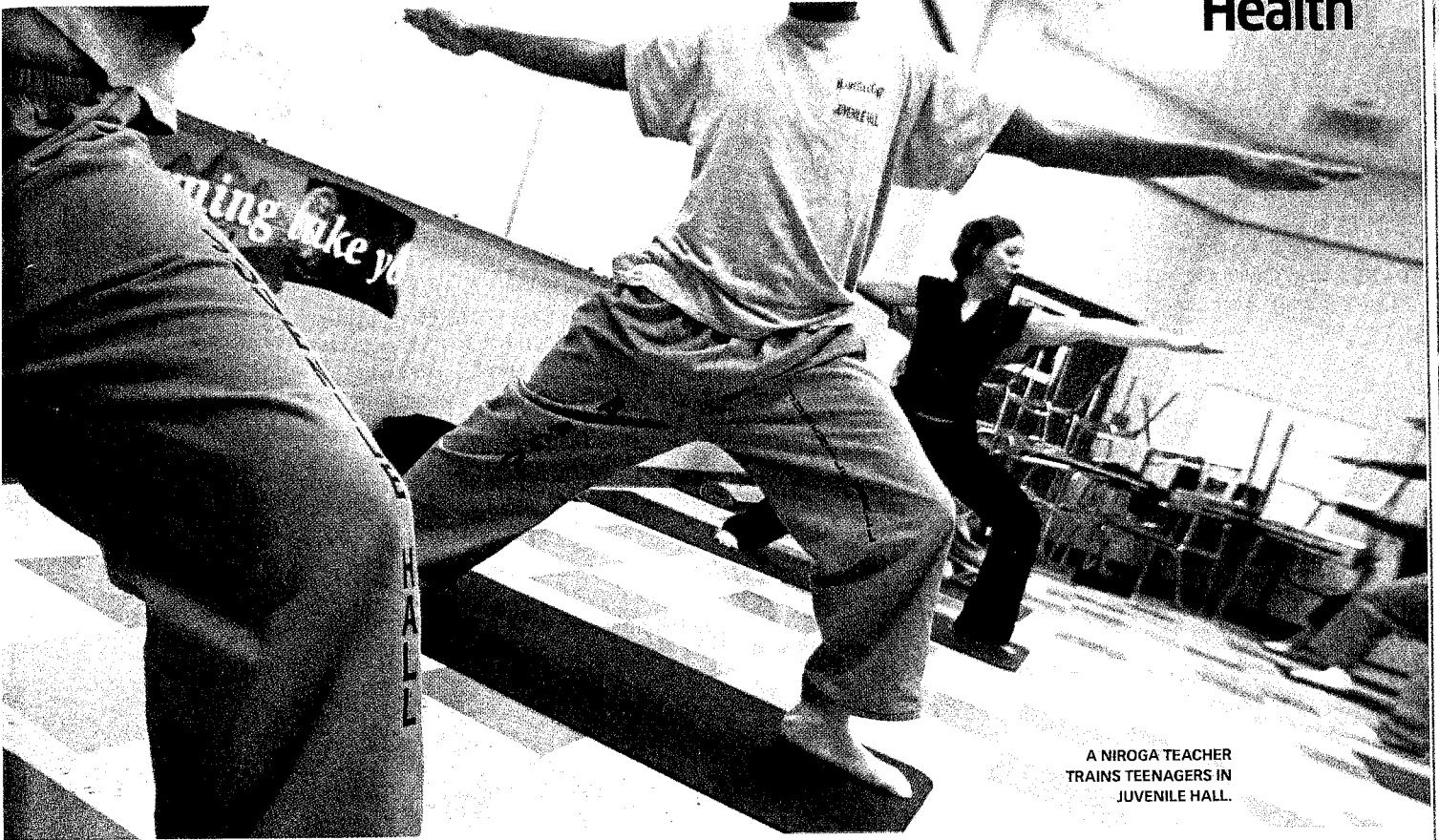
the class in the sun salutation. Without hesitation, he calmly recites the names of the poses. They stretch their arms up toward the ceiling, then down to the mat. The first time through, there's laughter. "We're going to keep doing it until it's not funny anymore," Hanson declares as they begin the series a second time.

"Why do ya'll call this a mountain pose?" one student asks.

"In this pose you're supposed to be strong like a mountain, so if I push you"—Hanson pauses, pushing against his shoulder as he stands stiffly—"you don't move." He nods.

"Usually the first change that happens is the attitude," Hanson explains later in an email. "When a young adult finds him- or herself in Juvenile Hall, they are forced to face the repercussions of their actions. No matter what lies ahead, it is imperative to provide them with various methods to increase resiliency."

Juvenile Hall staff members seem to agree. Penny Russell, a clinical psychologist at the Juvenile Hall guidance clinic, recalls a story about a narrowly averted confrontation on the basketball court. "One of the boys had gotten angry and almost got into a fight. The other boy told him to remember his yoga and he said, 'Oh yeah'



A NIROGA TEACHER TRAINS TEENAGERS IN JUVENILE HALL.

and calmed himself down. Yoga teaches the kids ways to relate to themselves and others in a very positive and different way than what is modelled to them at home and in their neighbourhoods."

Of course, there are physical rewards too. The three incarcerated teens interviewed for this story are enthusiastic about the positive effects yoga has on their bodies. "A lot of people have back problems here," one explains, citing their very thin mattresses. "Stretching out my back—yoga really helps that," another confirms.

But helping hurt backs isn't the only benefit they found. One student mentions a companion's intense interest in yoga. "My friend wants to continue doing it for a long time once he gets released." He says yoga is affecting his own mood as well. "It's less stressful. Sometimes there's a little pain 'cause it's hard, but it's refreshing."

**KIDS ARE SENT TO JUVENILE HALL FOR** everything from murder and assault to drugs, robbery and prostitution. Some have violated their probation, by running away or cutting off their electronic monitoring bracelets, for example. Hanson explains that yoga class at Juvenile Hall is initially met with "skepticism and resistance. It is common for the boys to think that yoga is

for girls, until they see how physically challenging it can be." And in time, most of them take to it.

The Integral Health fellows come from a range of backgrounds. They are physicians, dance teachers, nurses, social workers and holistic health consultants. While their goals are varied, they all speak enthusiastically about the need for yoga in minority communities.

"People of colour, especially in this country, are not very health-conscious," says Demetrie Broxton, who works at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco. He's teaching his family yoga, and hopes to start a yoga club through the museum. Indra Allegra, another health fellow, is committed to helping the disability community as well as survivors of sexual assault and abuse. Her goal, she says, is to "use yoga as a tool [enabling] survivors to re-inhabit their bodies."

Melissa Brown, director of a school-based health center in Oakland, is concerned about inequality in the U.S. health-care system. She wants to bring yoga to the high school students with whom she works. "So many after-school programs are based on competition and strength," she says. "There's a lot of team stuff and that's where the students of colour go. I

 WATCH NIROGA AT WORK: [ODEMAGAZINE.COM/NIROGA](http://ODEMAGAZINE.COM/NIROGA)

wanted to bring something different to school that's geared toward looking in."

Jarralynne Agee, a lecturer in both the African-American studies and psychology departments at the University of California, Berkeley, agrees yoga can be helpful for incarcerated people. "The type of breathing and stances contributes to people having alternative ways of dealing with aggression and stress," she explains. "It's something where you just need yourself and space, and that's all prisoners have—themselves and space."

Agee also supports the idea of not only bringing yoga into communities but having people from the community teach it: "People should support more yoga if they want less violence, better health care and kids paying more attention in school."

Back in Juvenile Hall, Hanson has to separate two students exchanging heated words. "What is the purpose of yoga?" Hanson asks everyone to get the class back on track. Voices chime in from all sides of the narrow room. "Feel good. Relax. Calm your nerves."

For a moment, there is silence.

*JOSEY DUNCAN is an editorial intern at Ode.*