

***Freedom Inside? Yoga and Meditation in the Carceral State.* By Farah Godrej. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. ix + 346 pages. \$26.99**

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In *Freedom Inside? Yoga and Meditation in the Carceral State*, Farah Godrej powerfully examines *how* yoga and meditation are taught within US prisons. Godrej illuminates the ways such teachings potentially support or inadvertently subdue incarcerated persons through contradictory narratives of individual responsibility and social inequity. Analyzing these paradoxical outcomes, she poignantly foregrounds the historic role of yoga and meditation in non-violent political action to explain how the practices can reveal racial injustice and subvert neoliberal modes of perpetual self-regulation, which unjustly assign responsibility to the individual while avoiding systemic accountability. Godrej maintains that yoga and meditation can shift a subject's political consciousness by making them more aware of systemic inequity. However, she clarifies how incarcerated practitioners who solely accept the self-improvement narrative can still benefit, as they access tools and practices, even if the focus is on the individual and not the system. Godrej ultimately identifies what she terms "spiritual" resistance, or the development of incarcerated persons' internal resilience, as related to their "intrinsic sense of value, dignity, and meaning" (19). She concludes that these practices can be humanizing and empowering, despite problematic underlying narratives of self-responsibility. By interweaving political theory and ethnography, Godrej successfully contributes a noteworthy study on yoga and meditation in jails, prisons, and correctional facilities.

Godrej engages distinct methodologies as a participant-observer in her interpretive ethnographic research and discourse analysis. She joined volunteer organizations, participated in three different volunteer trainings, evaluated a course for incarcerated men, sponsored and led a yogic principles study group for incarcerated women, and conducted 60 semi-structured interviews with volunteers and formerly incarcerated persons to analyze the language and values disseminated through the teaching of yoga and meditation inside the carceral state. She used the "snowball" method to conduct relational interviews, developed thick descriptions to contextualize her experiences, and included the writing of formerly incarcerated interviewees to foreground a "collaborative approach to knowledge-production" (286). Her process of member-checking, or receiving feedback on the manuscript from interviewees, clarifies her claims and elucidates how even the most well-meaning volunteer instructors are implicated. Through conscientious self-reflection, Godrej evaluates her leadership role in a few of the organizations and reconciles with her privilege, even as one of the only South Asian volunteers who was most vocal about dismantling hierarchy.

Organized into four sections, the book first explores the motivations, ethics, and methodologies in Godrej's research. In the introductory chapter, Godrej establishes why the US carceral system is often described as a for-profit prison industrial complex; with more than 2.3 million incarcerated and eight million on parole, probation, or at risk of deportation, the United

States has the largest prison population in the world (5). Highlighting the United States' pervasive racial injustice, Godrej further underscores the social and political ramifications for those trapped in a perpetual cycle of, what she describes as, "second class citizenship," when formerly incarcerated individuals are prevented from fully reintegrating into society, discriminated against in employment, refused housing opportunities, and denied voting rights (6). In doing so, Godrej aligns with eminent abolitionist scholars such as Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Michelle Alexander as she identifies how society's most vulnerable individuals can be influenced by harmful neoliberal narratives embedded within yoga and meditation programs.

In chapter two, Godrej provides a compelling depiction of research and access restrictions in prisons. She discusses the ethical challenges she navigated while satisfying the prison system's methods of surveillance *and* the university's Institutional Review Board. For instance, Godrej discloses the limitations of gathering signed consent forms, which, in her experience, negatively impacted the possibilities of cultivating a calming experience as consent forms often contain complex language that can deter participation. Though these methods are implemented to "protect" incarcerated persons, Godrej argues the forms simultaneously re-establish their subordinate status (27). She further exposes the contradictions of giving incarcerated persons the opportunity to assess risk for themselves when they may also feel pressured to participate based on institutional power dynamics.

Godrej's third chapter traces significant historical and contemporary debates about yoga and meditation to convey valid concerns about co-optation or when practices are used to maintain dominant forms of oppression. She acknowledges the difficulties of using such teachings for social justice, while never abandoning the emancipatory opportunities of turning inward, deepening consciousness, or using discernment to dismantle conventional narratives that unjustly discriminate against marginalized communities (46). Godrej insists that yoga and meditation cannot be reduced to monolithic interpretations, or physical exercises, and must uphold expansive dimensions both historically and contextually. Here, she outlines how the practices may unintentionally bolster neoliberalism's aims in prisons by emphasizing self-improvement rather than cultivating an awareness of sociopolitical conditioning.

The book's second section (chapters four-six) depicts Godrej's work inside prisons as she locates distinct modes of resistance, claiming that incarcerated persons do not always internalize docility, even if yoga and meditation simultaneously emphasize a sense of self-responsibility. Chapter four reveals, through volunteer interviews, the disturbing and dehumanizing organization of prisons. Godrej employs Erving Goffman's theory of "total institutions" to address innumerable human rights concerns, including sexual assault and routine violence (72). Godrej argues that reforming prisons is not a viable solution since prisons function as a form of population control and uphold an inherent underlying belief in transforming individuals rather than the system itself.

Godrej expands on this critique in chapter five where she conducts 25 interviews with formerly incarcerated practitioners to ascertain if revolutionary consciousness can be achieved through yoga and meditation practices despite narratives of personal responsibility. 15 out of the 25 participants believed their incarceration was fully warranted and turned toward self-improvement. The 10 remaining participants credited *themselves* with self-transformation, having developed what Godrej describes as "'oppositional' consciousness," or an awareness that incarceration is structurally unjust (133). Accordingly, Godrej outlines the limits of a binary-based view of transformation. She further explores how inner strength or "freedom," a potential

outcome of yoga and meditation practice, can be an assertion of agency or “an act of subversion” for the incarcerated practitioners, regardless of their views on social justice (130). Similarly, in chapter six, Godrej critically observes a trauma-informed meditation course at one of the facilities to highlight its ameliorative role for the participants. She demonstrates why the ameliorative role could still improve their day-to-day experience, while a transformational role could more significantly change their experience by highlighting systemic inequity. For Godrej, the practices have humanizing effects overall, which help incarcerated persons endure hardships in prison.

Godrej’s third section focuses on volunteer perspectives in both local and national organizations. Chapter seven examines how local organizations reinforce a reliance on hierarchy and discipline within practices, an attachment to seemingly apolitical views, and a reluctance to move away from touch-based adjustments (195). Though Godrej incorporated a consent card system so that incarcerated persons could opt-in to touch, such changes were not embraced by all volunteers. She also discovered that some volunteers were more attached to notions of rigor than she expected and believed incarcerated persons needed yoga’s self-discipline (200). In contrast, a national prison yoga program, Freedom for the Incarcerated (FFI), asked volunteers to read Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* to reflect on their own biases about incarcerated persons while another national one, Social Justice and Yoga (SJY), went so far as to explicitly align yoga philosophy with political justice.

Chapter eight brilliantly explores volunteer perspectives on how yoga and meditation can help incarcerated persons. Volunteer narratives range from reforming the individual to emphasizing “inner change” in a way that clearly educates the individual about the system so they can cope with grief, loneliness, or physical and emotional discomfort (212). The problem with the first view, according to Godrej, is that individual responsibility is overemphasized as society often holds incarcerated persons solely accountable for outcomes even if challenges are structural and not only caused by individual choice. Additionally, Godrej explains how white, middle-class practitioners are not always educated on systemic injustice enough to incorporate social justice in their teaching, a cycle that unveils the pitfalls of a white supremacist, neoliberal, and capitalist society that pacifies the white, middle class (241). Godrej nuances these distinctions with care, illuminating the ways in which volunteer instructors (and, quite possibly, readers) are entrenched in a value system that infiltrates their teaching when they encourage empowerment but still focus on rehabilitation.

The book’s final section (chapter nine and the conclusion) proposes revolutionary experiments. Godrej’s profound ninth chapter examines closely related yet distinct narratives about transformation to further discern whether yoga and meditation practices in prisons are ameliorative or transformative. For Godrej and two formerly incarcerated co-authors, prison logic pushes for the transformation of the incarcerated individual, which requires them to take self-responsibility for the harm caused, while in other cases transformation occurs when an incarcerated practitioner understands why they are caught within an unjust system that profits from their incarceration. Godrej demonstrates how her involvement in facilitating a yogic principles study group supported incarcerated women as they developed a more astute vision of non-violent resistance within a system that perpetuates harm. In the conclusion, Godrej reviews the book’s complex narratives to explore possibilities of social responsibility and abolitionist perspectives on “non-reformist” reforms, such as policies or programs that aim to dismantle prison systems over time (282). Godrej uplifts the voices of incarcerated persons to illustrate the need for lasting change.

Godrej's *Freedom Inside?* evocatively grapples with the debate over individual versus societal responsibility; she challenges reductive views on transformation and what it may entail. She articulates, through accessible text, how, for many of the volunteers, yoga and meditation are not intended to discipline or promote docility or support prison logic, but to foster self-care practices that increase incarcerated participants' capacity for self-awareness. Yet, her inclusion of academic research and personal narrative demystifies notions of neutrality and poses a significant question: how can volunteer teachings further evolve so that oppressive structures can, in fact, be dismantled? Godrej ultimately offers a critical and insightful analysis that combines yoga and meditation with timely conversations around social justice and healing as society at large contends with the systemic injustices of racial capitalism and neoliberalism.

This pivotal book is much needed and contributes an eye-opening examination of how marginalized communities are institutionally disenfranchised; Godrej identifies the overlapping and intersecting, even paradoxical, forces that indoctrinate and disempower incarcerated persons. Throughout her analysis, Godrej provocatively resists harsh narratives about incarcerated persons while also vitally acknowledging that some people have committed real harm. In doing so, Godrej does not deny the violence that has occurred on any level such as violence committed by incarcerated persons or violence enacted by the carceral state when it undeniably perpetuates cycles of oppression. Nonetheless, Godrej offers a firm critique of prisons, which require urgent dismantling, and maintains that incarcerated persons need yoga and meditation practices to develop their inner and outer worlds *until* prisons are abolished.

Significantly, Godrej's text has the potential to support those who are incarcerated or not, as readers are invited to evaluate their own beliefs, unique privileges, unconscious biases, preconceived notions, and limiting beliefs around individual responsibility. How are violent neoliberal values of self-blame or self-improvement operating through all bodies? How can all bodies advocate for the protection of society's most vulnerable, either through direct action, continued education, or modes of collective transformation? Godrej crucially reminds readers that calling for social change necessitates personal growth. By extension, prison volunteers should engage in self-reflection when teaching incarcerated persons deeply meaningful practices.

This book – the first to examine how yoga and meditation are taught in prisons – is useful for yoga and meditation instructors, prison volunteers, incarcerated persons, scholars, policymakers, abolitionists, and students of all kinds. Even for the most self-aware, social justice-oriented readers who are dedicated to interrogating language and hierarchy, this book underscores how values within practices can still unintentionally yet dangerously align with prison logic, white supremacy, and neoliberalism. Because Godrej lays the foundation for future interventions, readers must consider how practices can reinforce dominant modes or critique the systems that structurally cause suffering, especially for those who are marginalized and in need of more resources and equitable solutions. Godrej notably delineates the importance of impact versus intentionality and highlights how instructors and practitioners can be simultaneously complacent and complicit within healing practices. In this regard, Godrej provides an extensive project on yoga and meditation in the carceral state, intricately revealing power apparatuses to advocate for incarcerated persons, their empowerment, and social justice.

References

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