

YOGA beats CONFLICT

fact! says
yoga elder,
David Sye

Not content with the official recognition of his Yogabeats method, self-confessed 'bad boy of yoga', David Sye is on a mission to have yoga recognised and used as a tool for social change.



One of the UK's most esteemed teachers, David has successfully piloted Yogabeats 'outreach programmes', taking yoga out of the studio and into conflict-stricken communities, ranging from the council estates of Scotland to the middle East. This not-for-profit work is supported by his holiness the Dalai Lama.

In my opinion, yoga has become far too elitist and self-obsessed. We, within the yoga world, need a sharp reminder of the real transformational qualities of

regular practice - the effect that yoga can have on an individual's life as opposed to their thighs. And nowhere can this be seen more clearly than when taking yoga out into the community; using this ancient tradition as a tool for change in today's society.

Yogabeats commits a percentage of its time and effort to not-for-profit outreach work in communities affected by conflict. I firmly believe that all studios and teachers should be giving something back, and there are many great examples of those who do, as we are so fortunate to be in this wonderful position, sharing our passion for yoga for a living. It is our role, as ambassadors for yoga, to show our society that this way of life is for each and every one of them, regardless of age, background or ability.

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By what do I mean by conflict resolution? This isn't limited to physical war zones - though there are plenty of obvious examples across the world today. There are so many groups disadvantaged by circumstances - violence, crime, the breakdown of society around them, so, as it seems politics or the system often fails these people, why not give yoga a try? As a holistic way to establish personal boundaries, or morals and to empower individuals to change their own circumstances for the better.

The love affair with this type of work began for me in Bosnia - I was caught on the Serbian side of the **Yugoslavian conflict during the early 90s. Here I noted** that music could be used to focus soldiers' minds: blocking out the incessant background noise of war, **enabling them to feel the benefit of yoga and, in turn,** alleviating their symptoms of stress. The seed was sown to pilot Yogabeats in other volatile situations.

How it works

The most important lesson I've learned is that you have to make yoga appealing to your audience and their unique situation, without detracting from its roots. Once people are hooked then you can start to work on a deeper level.

On an individual level, we have to welcome change in order for it to happen and, as I have seen first hand, yoga can be that chink of light at the end of life's tunnel. A source of confidence and awareness that another way of being is possible. Once the shift starts to happen (within the self) we see that collectively change and lasting peace are possible within our communities.



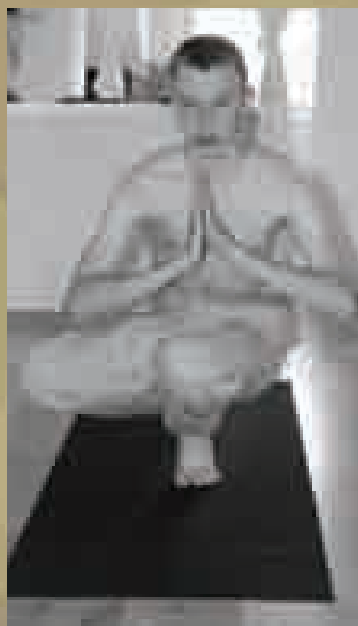
Workshops consist of breathing, meditation, dynamic 'asana' postures and tons of hilarity (a hall-mark of all Yogabeats classes); incorporating modern music like hip hop and dance beats to loosen inhibitions and focus the practitioners' minds on the positive emotions that arise in class, rather than dwelling on doubt and negative thoughts.

The initial idea, Bosnia

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Getting British youth high on yoga

Suddenly opportunities were presenting themselves both at home and abroad including a project close to my own heart in Easterhouse, Glasgow. Often held up as an example of 'broken Britain' this estate has suffered from poor planning and neglect and the en-



suing social problems of alcohol and drug abuse and crime.

My dad [legendary singer and performer Frankie Vaughn] undertook a mission to tackle street crime issues in Glasgow over 40 years ago; building a community centre in Easterhouse [which he single-handedly financed through his music concerts in Glasgow] so that the youth of that time could live to realise their full potential.

Today we are using yoga fused with the beats of urban music as the means to bridge divides, starting with the youngsters, many of whom are involved in gang-related violence.

Of course the guys were sceptical to say the least about the whole 'hippy yoga' thing but the results have far exceeded expectations. As I said, we must make yoga relevant in order to harness its ability to shift perceptions. Its no use spouting a load of philosophy or 'do's and don'ts' to these kids -

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they'd be straight out the door - we throw them into postures and pranayama that challenge the body and create positive states of mind and giving them a 'yoga buzz'.

And through this, the messages underlying the yoga path start to filter through. Expanding consciousness and increasing self-esteem for these lads spreads ripples of hope out into the wider community - families, friends and neighbours.

"David's work has ended clashes between members of rival gangs, bringing youths together by creating a shared passion for - perhaps surprisingly - yoga." says Richard McShane, project co-ordinator.

Now that we are rebuilding the mind connections between individuals, we are looking for funding to rebuild dad's centre as a physical place for the community to meet.

Changing perceptions and behaviour

Yogabeats has been involved with the Brixton 409 project, which combats knife crime on the streets in South London, as well as the 'Motivate the estate' campaign in Southend-on-Sea.

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"Many who struggle to engage in activity for more than a few minutes spent a significant amount of time completely absorbed in the session...this can lead to quite radical changes in behaviour." says local charity Youth at Risk.

Breaking down barriers in Israel

Over the last month I've been revisiting projects we initiated in Israel in 2006. I was invited to the country to host workshops but insisted on including both Palestinians and Israeli students. Making myself unpopular as usual!

Observing that the techniques of yoga could break down perceived barriers and create common ground for people equally affected by and beyond the politics of war, Yogabeats has since been working with women's groups in the region. These people have a lack of physical expression due to the confines of conflict and culture, but yoga has helped to release them from, and break the cycle of fear.

The next phase is creation of a yoga centre for Palestinians in Ramallah, which is being supported by the UN. Here Yogabeats has offered to run a free training course in order to create the next generation of teachers from within the local community.

How you can help

You only have to look at the introduction of yoga to the school curriculum, yoga therapy within the NHS and the great work of the Phoenix Trust in prisons to see that there is a growing western awareness and acceptance of yoga's multitude of benefits.

But it's not wide enough, often not reaching those most in need. I firmly believe that projects such as Easterhouse can be used as a blueprint for other disadvantaged communities in the UK and beyond.

Yogis and the yoga community need to take responsibility. We know how powerful a tool we have at our fingertips; so we must use it within the studio and out in the wider world, even in situations where officials and politics have failed and the issues have been brushed under the carpet.

I invite readers of Yoga Magazine to take up the challenge for themselves and find ways of integrating yoga into their communities and telling us about the results. Now is the time to show that yoga is a non-elitist tool for transformation and peace; whether at grass roots level or on a global scale."

Yoga teachers and students can contact Yogabeats: info@yogabeats.com and offer their time and support to our outreach projects. Members of the public and corporations can make donations to the Easterhouse campaign directly through the website yogabeats.com.

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