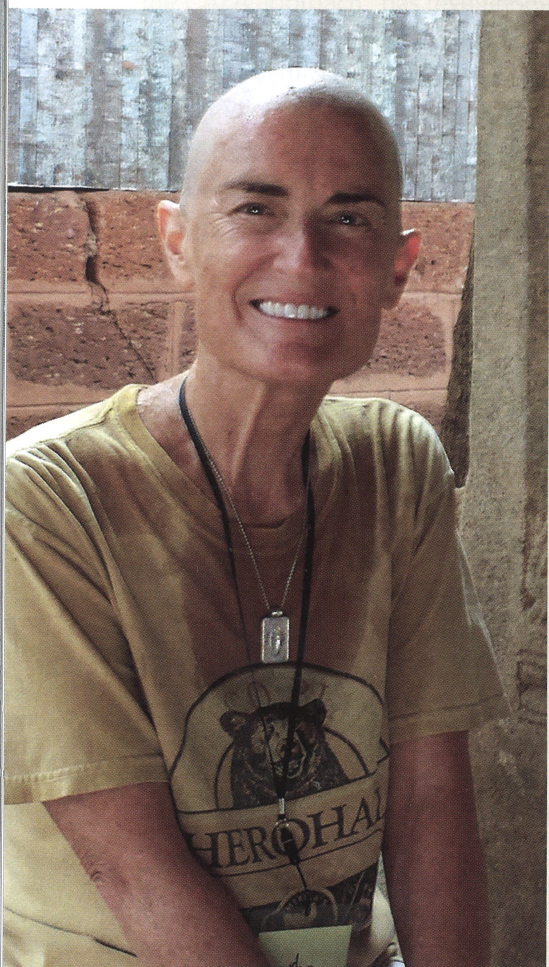


Taking Yoga from India to Prison to help workhouse prisoners re-enter the workplace

by Shelley Thomas, Ph.D.
Thomas is an MTSU French teacher and member of the Honors faculty. She is the founder and director of the Center for Accelerated Language Acquisition (CALA).



Shelley Thomas continues the tradition of tonsure, whereby new trainees may opt to shave their head as a part of the Hatha Yoga Teacher Training Program in Coimbatore, India.

On July 15, 2015, I arrived at the Isha Yoga Center, an ashram in Southern India tucked away in the Nilgiri Biosphere. This international reserve, surrounded by mountains and palm trees and full of wild animals, has the feel of a primitive Hawaiian island and is home to various tribal communities.

The purpose of my six-month stay was to become part of a unique program that trains and certifies people from all over the world in the classical science of Hatha Yoga. There were 140 participants from 27 different countries who spent over 1,700 hours learning yoga, listening to lectures on Ayurvedic and Siddha Medicine, and visiting sites of historical importance to the ancient yogic tradition. Participants followed the ashram's traditions of cold showers, hand-washing clothes, and eating with the right hand while sitting on the floor.

My trip to India was preceded by 12 years of learning yoga and meditation from Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, a yogi and the founder of the Isha Foundation. In 2014, I was invited to present my journey and reflections on my experience in a talk titled "Yoga and Meditation with an Indian Guru," which was a part of the "Health and Happiness" Lecture Series headed by Dr. Philip Phillips, Honors College associate dean.

Vasudev was originally invited to the United States through the Physician Wellness Program at Vanderbilt in 1997. Dr. Paul Ragan, the former medical director of the

program, sought to bring attention to an often neglected aspect of patient care and well-being: mindfulness as it relates to the body's natural ability to calm itself. The presentation was so well received that Vasudev was offered additional speaking engagements at leading U.S. institutions and also globally at the United Nations and the World Economic Forum. He had the honor of giving one of the first TED Talks in India. His book "Inner Engineering: A Yogi's Guide to Joy," is currently a *New York Times* bestseller.

My initial interest in hearing what Vasudev had to say about yoga and meditation began in 2004 when I began a three-year training program on the brain. Brain-based learning is the focus of my research and basis for my graduate methodology course for the Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) program in the MTSU Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. This research led to an aspect of teacher training that has been sorely neglected in many teacher-training programs: stress management. As a result, I invited a certified Isha Hatha yoga teacher, Rishi, trained by Vasudev, as a guest lecturer to teach my students simple practices that they could continue after the semester concluded, equipping them with stress-management tools that could provide support in their everyday lives and jobs.

As I introduced these tools to my graduate class, I also opened up weekend Isha Hatha yoga classes to

MTSU faculty, staff, students, and the surrounding community. "I consider this a very valuable weekend," Dr. Philip Waldrop, associate dean of the MTSU College of Education, said about his experience in the class. "My goal was to learn a system of practice that I could continue on my own, and the weekend certainly satisfied that goal. I would definitely recommend the experience to others."

Isha Hatha yoga classes were also added to the teacher in-service training given each summer through CALA, which is housed in the University Honors College. Lori Taylor, language teacher from West Creek High School in Montgomery County, Tennessee, wrote of her experience in the teacher-training workshop: "The relaxation movements that we learned are important to our profession because mental and physical health are imperative to being professional."

The success and relevance of the Isha Hatha yoga classes led me to a unique partnership with the Rutherford County Correctional Work Center (RCCWC). This partnership is a direct result of my two-year experience as one of the co-facilitators of the *Great Books* program in Nashville prisons, initiated and directed by Phillips for the past nine years.

In May, I responded to an invitation to help start a yoga pilot program by offering Rishi's Hatha Yoga classes to the men of RCCWC. Maridel Williams, founder of Doors of Hope, and Kimberly Salyer, program director at the RCCWC, have been working together to lower recidivism rates through educational programs in Rutherford County, and it has been a huge success. Their hope is that yoga will help equip the men to manage their stress and function successfully as they re-enter society

and the workforce. One of the men participating in the RCCWC program noted of his yoga experience: "I really like this class. I feel like I'm getting a workout. . . . My focus is getting better."

As indicated by decades of research from the neurosciences, yoga and meditation have been validated as powerful tools for reducing stress by activating the body's natural mechanisms for relaxation, improving performance by increasing focus, and humanizing relationships by changing the brain in ways that promote compassion. I am grateful to be a part of an academic community that encourages the type of environment which fosters well-rounded success—something that our students, faculty, staff, and surrounding community so richly deserve. **H**



Yoga with Rishi at the Rutherford County Correctional Work Center