Yogi moves to free minds inside prison in Oldham

Luckett inmates offered ‘escape’ in yoga classes

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LA GRANGE, Ky. — Luther Luckett Correctional Facility is a place where the mere murmur of a yoga chant might bring ridicule and violence.

*Ommmmm, ommmmm.*

After all, this is a medium-security prison where 1,100 inmates are packed into quarters designed for only 485. A place seething with killers, pushers, rapists and thieves.

Yet about 40 prisoners gathered every day last week in Luckett’s small gymnasium to hear that their criminal records might describe only who they were, not necessarily who they are.

The messenger was a tall, soft-spoken Indian yogi whose title, Sadhguru, carries a meaning in ancient Sanskrit that resonates with particular urgency in modern prisons:

*Disperser of darkness within.*

Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev had brought his teachings to Luther Luckett, only the second prison in the United States to try his ambitious program of yoga for inmates.

“Prison is a violent place, an angry place, and generally just an unhappy place,” said Adam Duran, 25, a Lexington, Ky., native convicted two years ago of trafficking in heroin. “But I’ve learned in this class that I can be happy and joyful in this place. In a negative environment, I have the choice.”

Yoga is the means — or can be, Vasudev says.

His program is called In-ner Freedom for the Imprisoned and strives to “transform hardened criminals into beings... aware of their divine nature,” said volunteer spokesman Linda Wright.

Through a nonprofit organization called the Isha Foundation, Vasudev has spent a decade bringing yoga instruction into Indian prisons, where he teaches the Eastern discipline as a means of coping with the stresses of prison life.

“Prisons are an essential part of human society, unfortunately,” Vasudev said. “But one day, most of these prisoners will get out, and being in a situation like this can make them even more dangerous than they were before.

“We try to help prisoners become wonderful human beings, which they already are somewhere deep inside. I think it’s an essential duty for every citizen to put some effort into that aim.”

James Mallory, a sex offender from Louisville, said he is eager to use his time behind bars to make himself a better person.

“I’ve been incarcerated for 20 years,” said Mallory. “But I’ve learned to love myself, and that’s a big step in the right direction.”

“Inner Freedom” was well received at the Luckett correction facility.

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We try to help prisoners become wonderful human beings,” Indian yogi Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev said.
Yogi moves to free Luckett prisoners’ minds

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since I was 14 and, let me tell you, this ain’t no kind of place to be,” said 19-year-old Mallory. “I saw this yoga class as an opportunity to deal with life in here. I think it helped me, too.”

Hailed as a success in India, Vasudev was invited to bring his program to the United States in May. His first workshop in the country, at a Pennsylvania prison called SCI-Dallas, was so well-received that he has been asked to eventually teach the program at every other correctional facility in the Keystone State.

“Once they did it, they forget about all their problems and put aside their differences.”

Vasudev says yoga liberates the mind by teaching a person how to control the energies that control his behavior.

“Most people are deeply enslaved to external situations,” he said. “Their energies function compulsively, not voluntarily. If their environment is peaceful, they also are peaceful. If it is hateful, they are hateful.

“Yoga teaches how to make your energies function by choice, not compulsion. I don’t have to teach you ‘be peaceful, be happy.’ That is everyone’s choice. If your energies are in control, you can choose to be peaceful.”

The inmates who joined the class were pleasantly surprised to find it more than just a dodge, or just a peaceful respite for three hours a day.

“Honestly,” Duran said, “I signed up just to get a break from my (substance-abuse) program. I thought yoga was all about doing handstands and all sorts of weird postures, but he brings out a different side to it.

“Bottom line: I just wanted an escape, but I got so much more.”

“Escape” is a word that cropped up frequently in discussions with inmates who completed the class Sunday. They know that breaking out is a virtual impossibility, so Louisville native Larry Lucas said he and others want to learn any new skill that “can help you focus and kind of get away.”

Lucas, 38, has spent the last 15½ years behind bars for participating in a robbery in which a person was killed. He is not ashamed to cross his legs, sit on the floor and murmur ommmmm.

“Call it escapism if you want, I don’t care,” Lucas said. “Anything that takes me out of prison, I’m with it.”

“You might have to be inside prison,” Lucas said, “but prison doesn’t have to be inside you.”