



Review of the Australian Yoga Therapy Conference – Sydney June 11-12, 2011

By Cari Havican, Yoga teacher and therapist, Anam Yoga

AAYT has been a supporter of the first Yoga Therapy conference for Australia which was recently hosted by Enlightened Events at the Vibe Hotel in Sydney. With 12 extremely proficient speakers over the weekend, each passing to the delegates a vast array of information, this is just a snap-shot of the weekend.

Having travelled from India via Melbourne, **Dr Shirley Telles** was the first speaker for the weekend and focussed on Yoga for Health and Disease Prevention. In a nutshell – how to make people who feel good, feel even better. To do this as Therapists she advised we need to understand the Yoga theory of disease – that an imbalance within the brain via either thinking or feelings create an influence on the subtle energy of prana, which ultimately leads to irregular breathing patterns (an early sign of disease). Dr Telles advised that the breath ideally should be diaphragmatic, regular and without jerks. A breath ratio of 1:2 – that being the exhale is double the length of the inhale (without strain or struggle). The long slow exhale increases the Parasympathetic Nervous System, whereas the Inhale activates the Sympathetic Nervous System or fight/flight response.

She also recommended knowing how various Yoga practices affect the 5-Koshas eg Asana and Kriyas work on Annamaya Kosha, whilst Meditation and Devotional sessions work on Manomaya Kosha.

As a researcher, Dr Telles shared the results of several recent Yoga research studies she's been involved with – three of which include:

- a) The effect of Yoga Practice in School Children. In this study there was a marked improvement in the children's self esteem levels especially relating to their academic performance.
- b) Young Adults: Professional Computer Users. Asanas were found to decrease both musculoskeletal discomfort of the computer uses, and somatisation of stress. Trataka was found effective for computer vision syndrome.
- c) Yoga and Ayurveda for Healthy Older Persons. This study showed improved quality of sleep, memory, lung functions, gait and balance.

A panel discussion was then conducted to define Yoga Therapy with Dr Shirley Telles, Jen Schrader – AAYT President, and Professor Marc Cohen.



Jen Schrader – outlined the background of the AAYT, its standards, and level of professionalism required by members to conduct themselves in both a legal and ethical manner. She said it is important that members understand the disease process, the tri-doshic theory of Ayurveda, and how the Kleshas and Koshas are applied in the application of Yoga Therapy, while working with clients as individuals. The Yamas and Niyamas outlined in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali were advised to be part of the AAYT's Code of Practice. Full Membership and Subscriber levels of membership were outlined briefly.

Prof Cohen – advised that to find a good practitioner, the key is to look at the team they work with – who they refer to, along with who refers to them. This defines the scope of their practice.

Dr Telles – advised that in India Yoga therapists are associated with a medical doctor, one who ideally is neutral, that is - not antagonistic towards Yoga and similarly not overly enthusiastic.

Other presenters included:

Dr Shaun Matthews, who has a background in western medicine, Ayurveda and Yoga, sees people with chronic and life threatening illnesses. 70% in his practice have physical problems and 30% have mental illness. Many have never heard of Ayurveda or had exposure to Yoga so he takes a very neutral approach. Starting with awareness of the 5-koshas to discuss the energetic view or paradigm linked to the mind/body connection of the disease, he gives each client a structure to support their healing journey via physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels.

Dr Craig Hassed is a Senior Lecturer at Monash University and talked about the Health Enhancement Program for students at Monash. With 75% of interns experiencing burnout eight months into their internships, it has been found that medical students who have had exposure to and knowledge of Mindfulness training are more likely to use these techniques themselves, and recommend them to their patients.

Annette Loudon, based in Tasmania – is currently working on her Masters of Women with Secondary Lymphodema. She finds the therapeutic application of Yoga brings people back into their bodies. Pranayama practices such as Nadi Shodhana and Bhramari have been effective for people she's worked with over the years. Sitali is valuable when clients have the taste of the treatment they are receiving from some of the medications as it creates a cooling effect.

Annette advised that if there is secondary cancer in the bones, then the client shouldn't do any prone movements. In these cases it's better to do seated postures. She also advised the quiet postures such as Savasana and Child Pose can be very effective. Even focussed breathing could be considered a posture due to the stretching that may occur around the scar tissue after



surgery. She also advised that the effects of radiation may not occur until up to a year later.
cont.

Michael de Manincor, President of Yoga Australia started his presentation with three short stories about clients he's worked with and how their situations improved dramatically by following a Yoga practice which was designed according to their specific needs. He emphasised how the Classical Yoga Practices outlined in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali were a complete psychological framework for mental health and wellbeing. While research has demonstrated improvements in mental health from Yoga-based practices, he felt there were limitations in much of the research that has occurred over the years. This he felt was due to the different styles and techniques of Yoga practice, and limitations with various sample sizes, forms of methodology and various measurement parameters.

Professor Marc Cohen whose specialty is Research, focussed on Building a Research Foundation for Yoga Therapy in Australia. Starting with awareness of the Wellness to Illness Framework, he commented that it was harder to do research on people who have enhanced health compared to those who have ill health. Most people are somewhere in the middle with average health. Complementary medicine moves people up from where they are so that their flexibility of response increases and therefore their resilience also increases.

He advised that when undertaking research it's important to start with a valid question – preferably one that you're passionate about answering. From here decide the best methodology to answer the question eg a survey or a randomised controlled study. Then develop a team of experts to help you conduct the research. Depending on the nature of the study this may include: Chief Investigator, Statistician, Ethics Committee, Research Assistant, someone to recruit participants, Supervisor etc.

Then determine what access is required for infrastructure to support the research eg library, laboratory equipment, finance. With finance it can be difficult to get grants as there can be a lot of competition.

Prof Cohen advised that there is a need to do research to create a body of evidence which is what the medical systems use to recommend treatments. The more evidence that emerges it becomes ethically impossible for the medical profession to ignore the results.

Dr Swami Shankardev Saraswati – a medical doctor and Yoga Teacher specialising in chronic illness advised the importance of knowing the disease you may be working with really well, rather than simply doing an internet search. Movement, breath and sound are his key focuses. His definition of Yoga is “anything that expands self awareness”.



He spends time helping the client to understand the Gunas and their effect on their system eg sitting slumped in a chair can increase Tamas whereas sitting upright as in Yoga practices can increase Rajas. In treatment plans he feels that each Kosha needs to be nourished and supported. For his clients who are unable to sleep well and wake not feeling refreshed, he advises them to get up and do a Yoga Nidra practice then.

He also touched on the Prana Vayus, Chakras, Nadis, Tissue states, Mantra, Ajapa Japa and the 5-elements.

Andrew Wells from Dru Yoga described Yoga as being “the most enduring personal development program on the planet”. Having recently completed research on the Efficacy of using Yoga for Stress in the Workplace – several Mind/Body improvements were discovered including increased levels of courage, clarity of purpose, ability to deal with conflict, patience and tolerance and the list continued.

Dru Yoga uses Yoga postures as a way to reprogram the consciousness depending on what is out of balance. Linking Asana with awareness of Chakras and Koshas, Andrew had us all stand up and explore Trikonasana with the awareness of Svadhisthana Chakra and our ability to relate to ourselves, others and our environment, then bringing awareness of love and light to Svadhisthana Chakra whilst in Trikonasana.

Andrew mentioned that some teachers have spent time teaching in war zone areas, using Yoga practices to help with detraumatization in conflict zones.

Libbie Nelson a Yoga Teacher/Therapist and physiotherapist from Byron Bay, reinforced the importance of looking at the client and all they are presenting with and designing a practice that is truly for them, rather than simply going to a Yoga Therapy based book and utilising someone else's template or recommendations for the condition they present with. Basically know the disease and use practitioner assessment skills well – this is the key to a quality treatment. Libbie has been in discussion with Private Health Funds to start building support for client rebates for Yoga Therapy. She values the importance of maintaining Yoga as a Therapy especially with key stakeholders such as the government, health departments, insurance companies and medical and health professionals observing our industry.

Philip Stevens (Swami Samnyasananda) – a Yoga teacher and neurophysiologist specialising in sleep and stress, based in Melbourne. He teaches the Clinical Yoga module at Monash University (a cross between a tutorial and a Yoga class). Philip emphasised that students **MUST** pass this module otherwise they don't pass the course.



Referring to a number of research papers in his presentation, he advised the importance for researchers to know the “style” of yoga used in the study. He also referred to the 5 Levels of Yoga suggested by Swami Niranjanananda from the Satyananda tradition.

1. Yoga class – usually once per week.
2. Yoga practice – take aspects of class home with them
3. Yoga Sadhana – where therapy comes in as a more personalised practice, done for specific purposes.
4. Yoga lifestyle – integrating Yoga awareness into life. May or may not still attend a Yoga class. Regularly get up early to do Sadhana and go to bed early.
5. Yoga culture – teaching others to teach each other

Philip admitted that when he looks at an individual he sees a brain and a nervous system, and from this awareness he can determine a massive amount of information about the individual. He finds that if people are compliant with his recommendations of how to sleep and how to breath he only needs to see them for one session.

He concluded with a very brief tour of the cranial nerves and their relationship to aspects of Yoga practice eg glossopharyngeal nerve connects to sound and chanting especially Om.

Simon Borg-Olivier – from Sydney focussed on Mudras – which he says are a process of controlling energy (Prana) & information (Citta) through the subtle channels (Nadis) in the body. They include Asanas, Vinyasas, Pranayamas and Bandhas. Simon briefly discussed how Yoga Mudras relate to nerve tensioning or nerve stretching, the relationship of agonist and antagonist muscle groups in relation to Bandhas and how Bandhas strengthen and stabilise joint complexes; plus the seven circulatory pumps - cardiovascular, gravitational, musculoskeletal, respiratory, postural, co-activation and centripetal.

To demonstrate how the pumps are activated, we all stood up, and raised our hands in the air, noticing the effects of gravity upon stretched fingers, relaxed fingers, and fingers formed into a fist. We repeated this with the hands down by the sides. Then once again repeated the exercise, but this time stretching the fingers wide and closing the fingers to a fist quickly repeating several times to observe the musculoskeletal pumping action.

It was interesting to note that several presenters including Dr Telles, - were reluctant to recommend headstands as they can put the Sympathetic Nervous System into overdrive.

As the conference came towards closure, Dr Shirley Telles encouraged us all to document our findings as single case study reports which have value in research, and ultimately help to make



Yoga Therapy an evidence based science.

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