



YOGA for the body and mind

Growing up in a big German city with a mother who swam each morning, and who took her children out into nature as much as possible, made it likely that Anita Cornelius would choose an active life for herself. Hiking in the Swiss Alps during holidays, and a bit of dancing as a teenager, was soon followed by putting her nose into medical books and training as a doctor. Medicine stimulated her mind, no question. And yet, she tells me, 'I had this feeling of sitting all day, and of my body being stiff at the end of it'. So she started running and cycling, 'just because it felt great' to run or to cycle after a long day at the hospital.

As she worked her way up the hospital ladder in Zurich, with long hours, weekend shifts, and a competitive working environment – and not much time for anything else – Anita began to feel fatigue. Realising that she needed something to balance out her life she started attending Bikram Hot Yoga. On coming out of a session, even on those occasions when she'd been a bit reluctant to enter the hot studio, she'd say to herself with some surprise 'this feels good'.

All the while back at the hospital she started specialising in paediatric and neonatal intensive care, from 25-weeks premature babies to 16 year olds, all on life support. Thanks to her Yoga practice she felt calmer at work, needed less sleep, had more energy – and generally felt warm and balanced. She had started on her Yoga journey.

While the precise date is still contested, Anita tells me that Yoga has been around as a system for creating wellbeing within Eastern society for around 5000 years. The Yoga sutras, an important book about the yoga tradition, first appeared in response to a series of social questions: how do we best relate to each other, breathe deeply, concentrate properly and - crucially - still our minds? The practice of Yoga, Anita explains, assumes that the greatest wish of human beings is to be happy and, through happiness, to express our highest human potential.

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Although the heat of Bikram Hot Yoga felt at times slightly aggressive to Anita, this was always countered by 'the feeling of wellbeing that was so great after'. Through the use of mirrors in the studio she was able to see herself progress within the session, helping her to stay with what is known to be a particularly strenuous form of Yoga. Unlike the sports she'd been active in previously, Anita could feel the effects of Yoga over the whole of her body and mind— particularly in her breathing and ability to focus. This was something that she hadn't experienced with any other physical activity.

Around this time Anita met a Swiss teacher and semi-professional windsurfer and skier, Daniel H, who'd grown up in the mountains and lived a highly sporting life. A lower back injury had led Daniel to Yoga, to healing his own body and empowering himself in the process.

Yoga, Anita points out, is many things for many people. 'If', Anita suggests, 'you ask yourself "What is Yoga?" it's possible to get many answers'. For Anita and Daniel the answer is very simple. Yoga is 'a

holistic wellbeing system that, for most of us in the Western world, starts in moving the body and feeling the body'. Yes, she points out, Yoga is about stretching and holding particular poses. But the real reason so many of us are drawn to it is that you feel so good after you've done it. It's not the high you get from running, she points out. It's something quite different. It starts in something very basic, Anita explains, 'of moving all your joints in a way that releases tension in areas of your body where you didn't even know you had tension'.

But of course Yoga is also a philosophy, a way of being in the world. It acknowledges, Anita explains, 'that things do change. Our bodies change as they age, as does everything around us'. Some of us, she believes, feel comfortable with this, embrace it, and adapt our lives to it. Others resist, making every effort to keep everything the same - and, yes, to deny death.

Having lived in Europe all of her life Anita was faced, in her mid 30s, with a huge opportunity - and radical change. She was offered a position to help set up a combined neonatal and paediatric intensive care unit at the Hobart Hospital, to care for pre-term babies to young teenagers in the same setting (rather than, as was practice, nursing them in adult units or transporting them to mainland hospitals). After some real soul searching she took the position, Daniel looked to start a Yoga studio in the CBD, and their change was realised.

It took a while for Daniel to find a suitable way of teaching Yoga in Hobart. Wanting to bring the practice into as many people's lives as possible, he was mindful of not wanting to impose it on them. With a background in teaching he loved the challenge of taking a range of classes, heated and not heated. The Bikram Hot Yoga classes were popular, Daniel enjoyed teaching - however there was one problem. He was the only permanent teacher. While teachers came for short stints from overseas, this wasn't the answer since, despite leaving their footprint, they didn't put down roots and become part of the community. And being part of the community, a platform for wellbeing through regular Yoga practice, had always been high on his list of priorities.

It was only at this point that he discovered how strict Bikram Hot Yoga really is - and how threatened the organisation was at the prospect of Daniel employing teachers trained in other schools

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of Yoga. Adapting to life in Tasmania was not a concern of Bikram Hot Yoga. This very real conflict led Daniel to the painful recognition that, if he could live with the loss of the blessings of the Bikram Hot Yoga head quarters in the US, he'd access a whole range of Yoga practices, each of which he believed had things to offer - not least a larger pool of Tasmanian teachers.

Meanwhile, a couple of years ago, Anita came to a crossroads. Work in the hospital, with so few staff to do so much work, was draining. Deciding to follow her heart she trained in Power Yoga in Sydney. Finding it inspiring, she decided to adapt it for classes in Hobart. Having gone beyond the strictures of Bikram Hot Yoga, with its 26 postures, she could feel herself moving out of hospital life. And, after some more soul searching, she let go of her medical position. From a basis in Hatha Yoga she was now in a position to embrace a broad church of Yoga practices - 'involving so much more than just my body'.

'Your bliss is within you' and 'happiness comes from within not without' may sound obvious to some. But for Anita they are the fruit of a lifelong journey. Moreover she feels quietly confident that, far from being a step down from a senior hospital position, her role at the Fit Hot Yoga Studio in Hobart's CBD allows her to be 'as authentic as I want to be'.

'Looking after your body is', she believes, 'the first step in looking after oneself'. Although there's also an important spiritual dimension to Yoga, in Anita's mind it's not primarily 'a big intellectual exercise'. Nor is it anything to be dogmatic about. Ultimately 'it's by embodying experiences oneself', she explains, 'that you invite people to be inspired by them'.