



YOGA IN ALBERTA

The concept of wellness is now percolating in the minds of government officials, who are attempting to finance adequate health care. How can we manage in the face of limited funds and rising health care costs? Keeping well is one solution. Hence the concept of “wellness.” How can wellness be sustained or even restored? Are there ways for citizens to shoulder more responsibility for their own health?

Approximately 50,000 Albertans are already taking their physical, mental and spiritual wellness into their own hands by participating in yoga classes. The way was paved in the late 1960s by pioneers who were willing to experiment with new ideas brought here from India, Germany, Australia and elsewhere.

BUT LET’S GO BACK IN TIME to the heady days of the sixties—Beatlemania and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi—when the world frothed with new music and new ideas. In the first recorded account of yoga in this province, Gerda Krebs describes 1960s Alberta as “a yoga wasteland.” But Krebs, who later taught yoga on cable television for 20 years, was never to forget her first class with Friedel Khattab. She was seduced into a lifelong commitment. Others too had felt the calm, the joy and the ecstasy, and they naturally reached out to one another.

This band of “yoga pioneers” shuttled between Calgary and Edmonton, and later Red Deer, to meet and exchange knowledge. Time, distance and slippery winter roads didn’t deter them. Small as the community was (fewer than 20 people), they had the homesteader determination to establish yoga in Alberta. “It would be cruel not to let the Western world know about the benefits,” they agreed.

In 1966, Dr. Mohan Singh, then a professor of exercise physiology in the University of Alberta’s faculty of physical education, began to share his ideas, introducing two full-credit courses. Amazingly, enrolment was three times

establish yoga’s credibility.

The Yoga Association of Alberta grew out of an instructors’ course organized by Dhanaraj, who had become a fitness consultant with Alberta Parks and Recreation after completing his PhD. In 1973, he published a report based on his research which concluded

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that yoga is a positive, healthy activity. The following year, Alberta Culture, Youth and Recreation gave yoga its blessing as a fitness activity, with financial support for clinics and workshops.

With the government and the University of Alberta recognizing its benefits, yoga now had some credibility, and in 1974 the Yoga Association of Alberta (YAA) was born. The officers were Mohan Singh (president), K.D. Prithipaul (vice-president), E. E. Bako (vice-president), Dorothy Havrelock (secretary) and Hubert Dhanaraj (advisor).

Because some instructors were distinctly under-qualified—teaching after having read just one book—the first step was to establish a training program for teachers and to set certification standards. International and national teachers were invited to workshops that were open to all.

The YAA Hatha Yoga teacher training program requires a two-year involvement with yoga prior to registration. Within two years after registration, the student teacher must complete a required number of hours with a senior teacher. Studies include yoga philosophy and related psychology, anatomy and physiology, yoga techniques and their therapeutic applications, and teaching practicums.

“Right from the beginning it was decided that teachers in the YAA would reflect many different yoga traditions. This was wise, as I see how dynamic and creative the association has become and how it has expanded,” wrote Pezarro in the 20th anniversary issue of the newsletter *Yoga Bridge* in 1996.

In the early days when the pioneers were asked what type of yoga they did, they simply said, “classical” or “traditional.” These terms have been used interchangeably to refer to the philosophy and practices systematized around 200 BCE into a classic text by the ancient sage Patanjali. However, traditional yoga more accurately refers to the practices before Patanjali’s work, and classical yoga to everything that evolved from his yoga sutras.

If the same question is asked today, answers vary from Iyengar, Astanga, gentle, Hatha or Raja to “I don’t know.” The practitioners themselves may or may not understand

Marcia Langenberg

the expected number. At the same time, a graduate student of his, Hubert Dhanaraj, was researching the physiological effects of yoga. Then, in 1968, Friedel Khattab in Edmonton and Hilda Pezarro in Calgary began teaching yoga to the public.

Albertans began to open up to Eastern philosophical ideas. However, negative perceptions still abounded. Some people saw yoga as a mind-control technique and therefore a cult. Krebs was once refused permission to teach a class in a church basement. It was high time to



Dr. Mohan Singh (left) was a professor of exercise physiology at the University of Alberta (now Professor Emeritus), and introduced the first two full credit courses in yoga at the university in 1966. The classes (right) continue to this day as part of his legacy.

what these classifications mean, but they are derived from the 5,000-year-old science of life.

YOGA IS ONE OF SIX INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES whose ideas were illuminated through meditative practices. Observing human behaviour, the ancient yogis gained insight into conditioning (physiological, psychological, sociological) and the realization that we aren't bound by our habitual

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patterns. A systematic body of knowledge about the human condition materialized, as did techniques for liberating ourselves from that conditioning and for moving toward self-realization.

Different forms of yoga, depending on which core practices were emphasized, grew from the central philosophy of liberation. They can focus on the study of spiritual texts (Jnana yoga), selfless-action (Karma yoga), loving devotion to a power greater than self (Bhakti yoga), meditation (Raja yoga) and physical training (Hatha yoga), to name but a few.

Hatha yoga is the most popular form in the West. Its focus on *asanas* (postures) and *pranayama* (breath work) is an entry point for the doers and achievers of western culture. The benefits include relaxed muscles, reduced pain, deeper breathing and more energy. These physical improvements are felt almost immediately, which captures the interest of participants who are wired for instant results.

Many streams of Hatha yoga have formed. For example, two yogis who were both pupils of T. Krishnamacharya cultivated popular disciplines. Iyengar style,

founded by B.K.S. Iyengar, focuses on body alignment and precision of poses, which are facilitated by blocks and straps. The Astanga style, founded by Pattabhi Jois, focuses on movement through a series of connected, complementary poses. It uses particular breathing techniques and perineal and abdominal locks.

EACH OF THE HATHA YOGA STYLES meets different needs, making yoga accessible to people of varying abilities and interests. They offer opportunities for workouts, for gentle exercise, for psychotherapy, or for restorative physiotherapy. Some instructors integrate methods from a variety of teachings. Classes or private sessions can meet the needs of competitive and recreational athletes, senior citizens, the injured, the ill, the mentally challenged, the stressed and the curious. Often, however, classes are composed of students with an array of interests and needs merely because the time fits their schedules.

When the pioneers decided the yoga association's mandate should be "to act in such a manner as to maintain and honour the traditions of yoga," did they foresee this explosive diversity of styles? Maybe or maybe not, but it was a wise decision, for Alberta today is respected around the world for its ability to maintain connections between different streams of yoga. Elsewhere, practitioners often don't speak to each other—the antithesis of the very essence of yoga. Implicit in the very word "yoga" is the concept of unity, as it is derived from the Sanskrit root "yuj," meaning "to yoke."

The fact that all yoga disciplines assist in the maintenance and restoration of health is not in dispute. As Dr. Janet Yoneda, a family physician with a diploma in sports medicine, says, "Yoga teachings of body work [posture, spinal alignment, specific strength and flexibility], breathing practices and meditation contribute to improved physical, mental and spiritual well-being."

It is indeed complementary to contemporary medical practices. As Singh, Govindarajulu and Dhanaraj write in *Fitness Through Yoga*, the first comprehensive text on yoga published in Alberta: "Yoga places immense emphasis on



Anita Sielecki instructing a University of Alberta yoga class.

the need for self-control in all matters of health, and hence a yogi must learn to master the body. Such a mental control over the body's functions must come through proper harnessing of the body's forces for its own good."

Instructors frequently hear remarks like, "I have been using yoga to manage my chronic back condition," or, "My knees have stopped aching because I have learned how to align them over my feet." Such comments reflect the beneficial effects which regular yoga sessions can have on the musculo-skeletal system. This ability to effect change—be it physical, emotional or spiritual—gives individuals a sense of harnessing the body's forces.

Through yoga, people are able to manage their chronic injuries better. Those with fibromyalgia can release tightness in their tissues and increase their energy. People with multiple sclerosis find some relief from the turmoil in their bodies. Pre- and post-natal women develop strength and steadfastness during the intense experiences of pregnancy and childbirth.

The effects of yoga are gradual and subtle, but they can redirect the downward spiral of being a victim into the upward spiral of taking an active role in improving one's health. This shift can feel like being unplugged from a high-voltage electric current the sources of which are the external demands of work, school and relationships—all those goals, deadlines, expectations and attitudes we place on ourselves. As yoga techniques kick in, the voltage decreases, enabling us to enter a more relaxed state.

By strengthening the body, regulating the breath and controlling the fluctuations of the mind, we are also able to find the intensity of direct experience. Whether the experience is of relaxed openness or constricting tightness, waves of pleasant or unpleasant emotions, a strong body and mind can contain the intensity of it. Thus we can rest in the experience rather than ignoring or repressing it. This can result in a gradual shift from imbalance to equilibrium and we may discover new ways of responding to our situation. "Yoga has taught me how to be in the present moment, to be gentle with myself during times of change, and to accept myself as I am, teaching that my full potential is already within me," says small-business owner and yoga practitioner Belinda Lang. "I'm simply learning how to release that potential into the world. Truly, yoga is an amazing gift."

Physicians, physical therapists, nurses, chiropractors, acupuncturists, massage therapists and psychologists are all recommending yoga to patients and clients. People take classes in rehabilitation centres, hospitals, public schools, post-secondary educational institutions, senior citizen centres, fitness centres, offices, community halls and church basements. Yoga in Alberta is no longer eyed with suspicion. It is now an accepted way to enhance wellness.

Marcia Langenberg is an Edmonton yoga instructor and president of the Yoga Association of Alberta.