

# Oz Yoga survey results

shows yoga can change your life

Sue Jackson speaks with Stephen Penman about some of the key findings from this unique Australian on-line survey of yoga practice in Australia.



The results of the Yoga in Australia survey are finally out. In 2006, nearly 4,000 Australians completed the half-hour on-line questionnaire, collectively clicking their way through 21,565 pages of questions about their yoga practice. This makes the survey the largest of its kind in the world, and is due to the efforts of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) researcher and yoga teacher, Stephen Penman.

## The rise and rise of yoga

According to figures from the Australian Sports Commission (ASC)<sup>1</sup> yoga is the thirteenth most popular physical activity in Australia (not including walking), with 2.9% of the adult population practising in 2006, a figure that has doubled in just five years. That puts yoga slightly ahead of Aussie Rules (2.7%) and just behind working out at the gym (3.1%). By comparison, aerobics was the most popular activity with 19.1% of the population. Overall, 90% of the people who practised yoga in 2006 were women, according to the ASC. In the United States, about 7.5% of Americans practised yoga in 2005<sup>2</sup> with 77% of them women.

However, Stephen cautions that before misrepresenting yoga as a purely

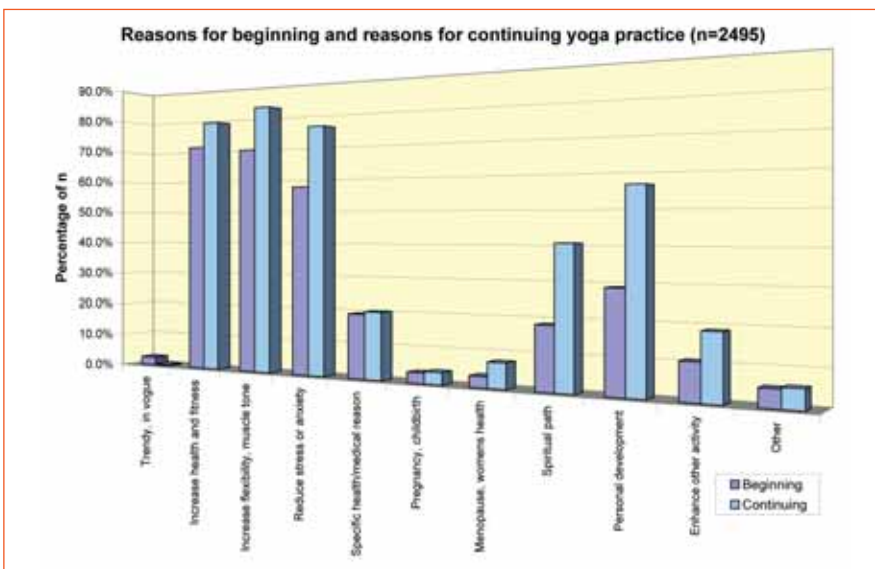
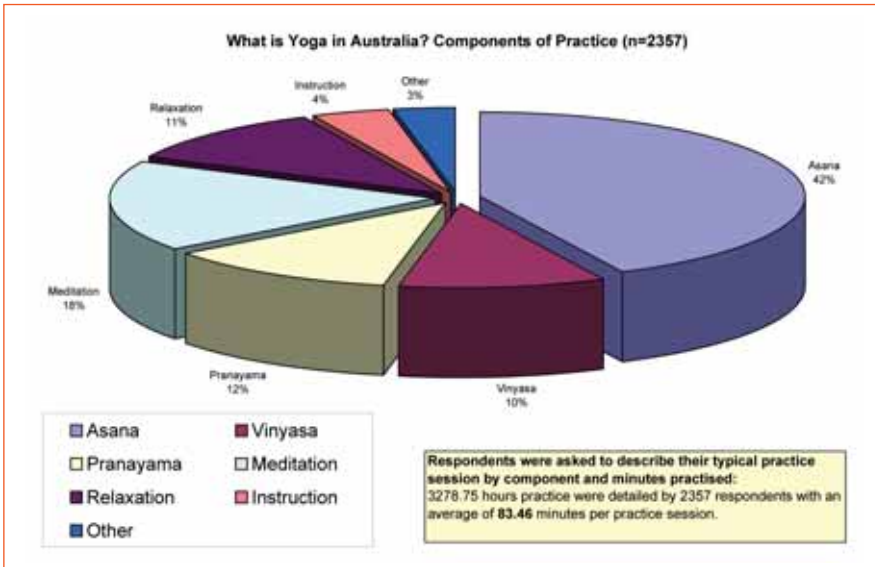
physical activity, it is important to point out that there is no data to say how widely Australians practise yoga as a spiritual path or way of life. A recent study by RMIT researchers puts the use of yoga as a therapy at between 7% and 12% of the population<sup>3</sup>, so it is reasonable to assume that the ASC physical activity data has not managed to capture *all* yoga practice in Australia. Hence, with the continual rise in popularity of yoga, the Yoga in Australia Survey provided an opportunity to develop a more comprehensive picture of the state of yoga in this country.

The Yoga in Australia on-line survey was conducted between June 2005 and January 2006. Recruitment was through yoga teacher networks, mainstream press, word of mouth, and by widespread distribution of nearly 50,000 invitation postcards to yoga

schools nationally. A total of 3,832 respondents completed the survey including 1,265 yoga teachers and 2,567 yoga practitioners. (The results described in this article include the yoga practitioners only). Despite a huge national response, participation in the survey was not random, therefore it cannot be assumed to represent all yoga practice in Australia.

## Educated, employed and health-conscious

The Australian yoga survey found that the 'typical' yoga practitioner (yogi) was a 41 year old female, practising regularly (1-2 times a week) for about five years, tertiary educated (81%), with a household income of \$70,000+ (78%), a preference for organic foods (46%) and a tendency towards vegetarianism. Interestingly, about one in seven yogis were employed in a healthcare



occupation – most commonly nursing, massage and psychology – confirming high levels of acceptance of yoga amongst healthcare professionals.

**Styles of yoga – what did the survey find?**

In terms of how Australians practice yoga, Stephen indicated that about half of the time spent practising (52%) was devoted to ‘physical’ practices like postures and dynamic posture sequences (asana and vinyasa), while about 40% of the time was devoted to breathing techniques (pranayama), meditation and relaxation. This suggests that yoga in Australia is a healthy mix of the many holistic practices that comprise this tradition, and not focused solely on physical postures.

“Styles were hard to define in the yoga survey,” says Stephen. “Many participants didn’t know what their style was called so just described it as ‘hatha’, ‘contemporary’, or ‘eclectic’. I’ve often said that there are as many styles of yoga as there are people practising, and the survey seemed to confirm this.” A common response to this question was ‘my own style’. However, across the sample as a whole, the acknowledged strongest influences in the way yoga was practised were (in order of frequency): Iyengar, Ashtanga, Pilates (surprisingly), and Satyananda. Stephen adds, “It seems to be one of the attractions of yoga that people develop their own personal practice from the different styles they have tried”.

Overall, 85% of survey participants were women, but this of course varied by style. Comparing styles practised across men and women, Yoga in Daily Life had the highest proportion of women with 92.5%, followed by Satyananda (88.5%), and Gita (88.3%); whereas the more physical styles of yoga had the highest proportion of men, like Yoga Synergy (23.2% men), Bikram (20.3%), Iyengar (16.0%), and Ashtanga (14.7%). There may be other styles with a high proportion of men, but not with sufficient numbers in the yoga survey to make any statement about them. Overall, male participation in all the stronger, more dynamic styles of yoga was about 18%, compared to about 11% in the more gentle contemporary classical styles. The overall male survey response of 15% is still a far cry short of the overall male participation rate of 23% in the States.

The average age of yogis seems to have fallen dramatically in Australia, as it has overseas<sup>2</sup>. According to the ASC, 25-34 and 35-44 year olds are leading the charge. The yoga survey confirmed this, with the mean age of people practising stronger, more dynamic styles like Bikram (34 years), Ashtanga or Vinyasa Flow (36) and Synergy (36) being lower than styles such as Iyengar (42 years), Gita (43) and Satyananda (47). Likewise, in the USA, Ashtanga, Vinyasa Flow, Iyengar, Power and Bikram seem to be the most popular styles overall, and are attracting the younger age groups to yoga.

**More than meets the eye**

The reason most commonly given for starting yoga was ‘health/fitness and flexibility/muscle tone’ (70%). This percentage rose to about 80% as a reason for continuing, confirming that yoga is primarily seen and practised as a physical discipline. However, ‘to reduce stress or anxiety’ was also given by 57% of people as a reason for coming to yoga; increasing to 76% as a reason for continuing-nearly as common as the physical reasons for practice.

Even greater differences were found in the questions about ‘spiritual path’ and ‘personal development’. While only 18% initially saw yoga as a spiritual practice, this more than

doubled to 41% once practising. Similarly, 29% initially saw yoga as a form of personal development, increasing to 56% as a reason for continuing to practice. Stephen says; “Yoga teachers will tell you that this is no surprise. People come to yoga for the physical but stay for the spiritual.”

Also worthy of investigation, 19% of people said they had a specific health or medical reason for starting yoga, remaining steady at 20% as a reason for continuing. Why is this relevant? Stephen says, “Physical activity has traditionally been the main reason why people start practising yoga and the survey confirmed this, but now people are also starting yoga to deal with problems such as stress, anxiety, sleep disorders and depression – nearly as often as for physical reasons. This is a sign of the times, perhaps. By asking participants why they started yoga and also why they continued practising, we found that perceptions changed once practising, confirming that there’s more to yoga than meets the eye. However, in the case of the one in five people who

started yoga to deal with a medical condition, the proportion who continued for the same reason remained steady, suggesting that yoga provided the assistance they were looking for.”

(72%), suggesting that in today’s society, mental health issues are rapidly catching up to the physical reasons for practising yoga. Women’s health was the next largest area (9%) with reported

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#### Can yoga change your health?

Of the 20% of participants who had a health or medical reason for starting yoga, most common were: stress; anxiety and depression; sleep and anxiety disorders (e.g. insomnia and panic attacks); or back, neck and knee problems (e.g. chronic lower back pain, disc injuries and arthritis). Interestingly, more people reported using yoga to address mental health issues (about 90%) than musculoskeletal problems

improvement in menstrual and menopausal symptoms, and assistance during and after pregnancy, ahead of gastrointestinal (7%), respiratory (6%) and cardiovascular (4%) conditions, with consistent improvement across all these categories.

Of all the conditions reported as being addressed by yoga, 53% were rated as ‘much better’ (both conditions and symptoms had improved), 29% ‘better’ (condition improved but



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symptoms the same) and 12% ‘little better’ (condition the same but symptoms improved). This appears to be a remarkable phenomenon. It seems that whatever condition people used yoga for, it improved. Overall, 96% of people found their condition improved by yoga, with the remaining 4% reporting their condition much the same.

#### Religion and spirituality

The religious orientation of yogis in their first year of practice was found to be significantly different from the general population. While 68% of the population identified themselves as Christian in the 2002 Census, only 36% of first-year yogis said they were ‘Christian’. Another 23% said they held ‘spiritual but non-religious’ beliefs. Likewise, while Buddhism represents about 2% of the Australian population, 6% of first-year yogis said they held ‘Buddhist beliefs’, suggesting that yoga initially appeals to people who do not identify with the traditional western religions.

Interestingly, the proportion of ‘Christian’ yogis steadily decreased with

years of practice, from 36% to 27% after 7 years of practice. Conversely, the people who initially said they were ‘spiritual but non-religious’, steadily increased from 23% to 30% after 5 years of practice. Those with ‘Buddhist beliefs’ also increased from 6% to 8.8% after 7 years of practice.

But then an interesting thing happened. After five to seven years of practice, the trend away from religion reversed, suggesting that while the non-religious spirituality available in yoga might initially provide a source of greater meaning in light of the decline of traditional religions, there is a point at which the two integrate. It may be that in the longer term, the spiritual path offered by yoga integrates with, or enhances the religious beliefs we were brought up to hold.

#### Can yoga change your outlook on life?

The answer to this question was an even more emphatic yes. Perceptions of quality of life were dramatically improved by yoga practice in all areas: physical,

mental, emotional and spiritual health; as well as in relationships. For example, one yogi had this to say: “Now that I’m doing a daily practice, I feel like I am at my best all the time. My relationships are better and I can deal with everyday life better because I don’t get so stressed about the little things any more.” Another said, “Practising yoga increases my quality of life ten-fold. I am calmer, more balanced and more in tune with my physical and spiritual self, making me a better friend, lover and mother.”

Over 60 years ago, the World Health Organisation created a forward-thinking definition of health, as “a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being, and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity”<sup>4</sup>. In support of this, many yogis took the opportunity provided by the survey to describe the way in which yoga had enhanced their all-round health, from average to good, or from good to excellent. The positive impact of yoga practice was evident in statements such as “Generally I am a much happier, emotionally stable person, which is a change from how I was before yoga.”

Some reported that they de-stressed, as the following quote illustrates: “Yoga and meditation have given me the stillness and grounded-ness I need to manage emotionally stressful times and situations”. Others reported that they gave up smoking, stopped eating junk, and stopped fighting with their partner or children as a result of yoga practice. That is, quality of daily life improved with yoga practice: “Yoga has a truly holistic effect. My experience has been that it improves every aspect of my life.”

#### Yoga and injury: A contradiction in terms?

Stephen says, “Some readers may remember the Medibank Private Sports Injuries report in 2004, which said that 25% of people who practised yoga got injured. What they may not know, is that Medibank later withdrew that section of the report after it was shown to be based on just 18 people, four of whom reported an injury in the two years prior. Well, now we have detailed data from the yoga survey on more than 1000 injuries.” Of 2,355 students who answered this question, 503 students reported 577

'injuries'. Most injuries were of the minor, non-specific, self-correcting variety like tight hamstrings, sore muscles and stiff joints. Many happened in the past or kept recurring, or happened outside of a yoga class. Sometimes participants were not sure whether the injury was really attributable to yoga, but it was first noticed during a yoga class. A typical participant comment was, "Yoga opens and adjusts the restrictions in my body, and this sometimes causes pain." Only 90 students (3.8%) reported injuries (including recurrences) requiring treatment or causing prolonged pain, or resulting in time off work, while under the supervision of a yoga teacher in the previous 12 months. Of these, 61 students (2.59%) experienced new injuries, suggesting that the real annual injury rate in yoga is around 3%. "While most injuries reported were just minor annoyances rather than true injuries, there were some serious injuries" says Stephen. "Shoulder stands (Sarvangasana), Head stands (Sirsasana), and Lotus (Padmasana) were the main culprits; also strong forward and backward bends, Trikonasana (Triangle), downward dog and dynamic sequences."

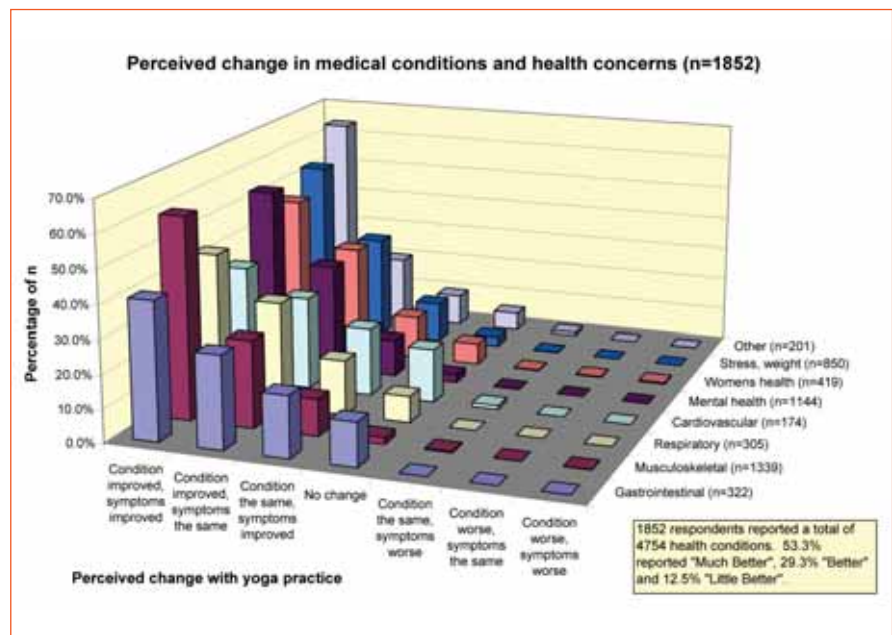
Most injured participants said it was their own fault for "pushing too hard". Other comments were:

"Swamiji always said that if you are really practising yoga injury is impossible. You injure yourself only when your mind goes elsewhere."

"Ambition and ego cause injury. Of all the yoga practitioners I know who practice mindfully, there is no evidence of any injury."

"If people are getting injured it's either not yoga or they're not listening to their bodies or their teachers!"

Stephen adds, "I'm particularly concerned about people advancing to Shoulder stand and Headstand without proper understanding and supervision. All too often in the survey people reported real neck, shoulder and back injuries that could so easily have been avoided." He goes on to say, "It's also time we stopped trying to force our western bodies into positions like lotus position before we are ready, causing long term damage to our knees." Lastly, he says, "There's another issue with



some teachers adjusting their students too forcefully or inappropriately for the student's needs. Teachers need to be aware that the yoga survey showed this up as a real concern. Some students reported changing teachers because of adjustments that were too strong or inappropriate for their needs, resulting in injury."

### Final words

The results of the yoga survey have provided a keen insight into the practice of yoga in Australia. It is clear that yoga is contributing to the overall health of yoga

practitioners, touching their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual selves. For Stephen, the impact that yoga can have on many levels of functioning is key: "It is important to understand that we are profoundly emotional beings and inherently spiritual. Once we validate this, we can begin to untangle the effect our thoughts and feelings have on our behaviour. Yoga is an effective way to develop this awareness, starting with the body and the breath; but ultimately developing stillness in the mind, inner peace, and lasting happiness."

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