
Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

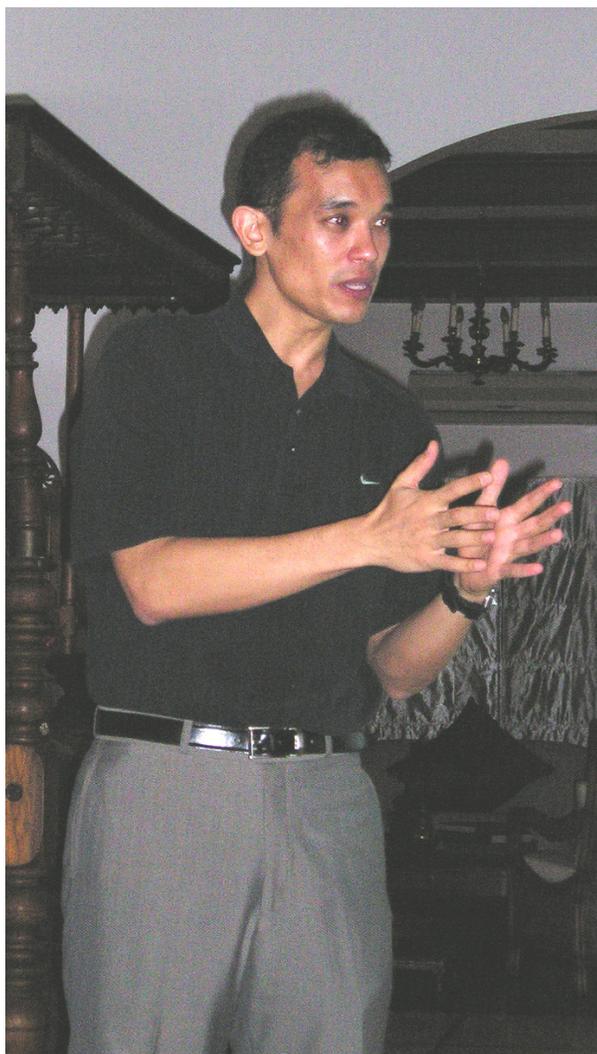
November 2008

Yoga and Stress-Free Living

By Shari Virjee Tañada

Beauty and form (and South Asian-inspired décor) were in perfect balance at the home of our gracious host, Shyamala Abeyratne. It was a fitting setting for this month's topic, Yoga and Stress-Free Living. Newcomers 2 weeks young, and long-term residents of Manila (26 years!) enjoyed a delicious meal in good company, an informative presentation and most of all, a stress-free evening!

Tall, lean and clean-cut, Tristan Choa (pronounced "Choy") is the Studio Director of Bikram Yoga Manila, the first Bikram yoga studio in the Philippines. In 2002, Tristan was working for a British insurance company in Thailand when he was invited to his first Bikram yoga class. It was hard and he nearly fainted twice. Not a surprise since at the time, he was 204 lbs, had a 38 inch waist, 2 knee operations and minor scoliosis. Something about the yoga kept him coming back. In 2004, he became a certified Bikram instructor. Today, he is a full time Bikram yoga instructor and an advocate of yoga in its many forms. At the meeting, Tristan led us in a discussion of stress, yoga, and how to reap the benefits from both.



Defining Stress and Yoga

Tristan began with a guarantee: Yoga is one way in which we can reduce stress. "Stress" and "Yoga" are so common in today's vernacular, but quite possibly misinterpreted and misunderstood. Family, deadlines, tight schedules... no one disagreed that these cause stress. What we do, or how each of us responds to the stress is a reflection of how our mind interprets it.

With the help of some colorful visual images, we tossed out the stereotype that yoga = old Indian man and contorted bodies. We accepted that it provides a 'mind-body-spirit' connection, serves as a form of exercise, and has many styles. We then reviewed a 'Life-Health' graph that pointed out an all-too-common reality: when we are too busy, we don't exercise. Tristan gave the example of professionals who pack in a full work day, then rush off to join peers at Happy Hour in an attempt to release stress; while intended as a

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(Left) Tristan Ochoa

DECEMBER MWF MEETING ■ **When:** 6:30 p.m., Monday, December 8, 2008. **Where:** Jenny Wallum's home, 1665 Dasmariñas Avenue, Dasmariñas Village, Makati. **What:** Lyn Silvano, Executive Director of Harvesters for Christ Foundation, will speak on "Transforming Lives for a Brighter Tomorrow." The Foundation works with underprivileged children, youth and families to improve education, health and community development in Tondo, Manila. **Bring:** Something to share for the potluck dinner. **January meeting:** Monday, January 19, 2009.

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relaxed after-work party atmosphere, many of us still feel “on.” This routine leaves little quiet time for rejuvenation or reflection – but how much of this “feel-good” and “quiet contemplation” stuff do we really need?

Too Much of a Good Thing

Without a doctor in the house, we were happy to listen to Tristan’s explanation of the body’s chemical response to stress. Adrenaline and cortisol can give us energy, improve memory and ready our immune system to handle an incoming threat in the short term. Self-help books have suggested for decades now that there is such a thing as positive stress; it motivates us to action. However, prolonged periods of stress can lead to a rise in blood sugar levels, possibly developing resistance to insulin and eventually, diabetes, poor memory and a weakened immune system. Tristan said that when you’re stressed, there

is a tendency to upset the normal functioning of the body through bad eating habits (such as junk food late at night), insufficient sleep, excessive drinking of alcohol (which adds to your already stressed system) and above all, lack of exercise (the first to go in the face of the “I’m just too busy” mindset). Yoga provides us with the discipline to avoid falling into the too-much-stress trap.

The challenge most of us have is making healthy lifestyle choices. Each of us needs a balance of positive stress (that which moves us to action), and being in a truly relaxed state (something many of us have to learn).

So You Want To Reach Your Toes?

“Yoga gets a bad rap because of advertising,” laments this yoga advocate. When people see amazing images of people in pretzel-like poses or balancing all their weight on their hands, they think they can’t do yoga, or they simply don’t want to look

“weird” in front of others. Little do they understand that these people are either blessed with flexibility, or they worked at it. A vast majority of us never consider the second option. “Yoga is for everybody. It’s a way to move the body in order to better understand both the body and the mind.”

Tristan admitted that yoga does take muscle conditioning and muscle memory. It also takes work. The physical pillars of yoga are flexibility, strength and balance, which increase range of motion. Each of us has our own unique abilities, and regular practice helps. “Start by reaching for your toes, perhaps while watching TV. Maybe you will get half-way down. By the end of the week, you will be closer to your toes.”

Breathing & Awareness

In yoga, much emphasis and learning is placed on strong, slowed

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The Lotus Position (Padmasana)

The lotus position or “Padmasana” is an advanced yoga posture that, for some, may take years of continuous practice before it can be mastered. The name is based on the fact that the position of the legs in this yoga posture look like a blooming lotus. “Padma” means “Lotus” in Sanskrit.

The lotus position is best suited for meditation and concentration because the crossed legs and straight back of this yoga posture keep the mind attentive and alert. It stimulates the pelvis, the spine, the abdomen, and the bladder. It is also believed that the sacral nerves are toned as the flow of blood to the legs is redirected to the abdominal area, stimulating the digestive process. It also applies pressure to the lower spine, which has a relaxing effect on the nervous system.

Left: Maha Lakshmi Devi, the Goddess of Wealth, sitting in the lotus position. Painted by Sivadas of Kerala after an ancient tradition. According to the Wikimedia Commons user who uploaded the image, it was painted for the Hindu community. There is no copyright for the picture, the use of it is free. (Source: Wikimedia Commons, a part of Wikipedia.)

“Yoga is the inhibition of the modifications of the mind.”

Yes, yoga is more than just postures. Here are other ways of understanding yoga.



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KaWoMeNaN

Selected and edited by
Beulah Pedregosa Taguiwalo

Yoga

“Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (Citta) from taking various forms (Vrittis).”

Five Meanings of Yoga

Yoga, we found, has five principal meanings: (1) yoga as a disciplined method for attaining a goal; (2) yoga as techniques of controlling the body and the mind; (3) yoga as a name of one of the schools or systems of philosophy (dars'ana); (4) yoga in connection with other words, such as hatha-, mantra-, and laya-, referring to traditions specializing in particular techniques of yoga; and (5) yoga as the goal of yoga practice.

Sanskrit Yoga

The Sanskrit word yoga has many meanings, and is derived from the Sanskrit root yuj, meaning to control, to yoke or to unite. Translations include joining, uniting, union, conjunction, and means.

Outside India, the term yoga is typically associated with Hatha Yoga and its asanas (postures) or as a form of exercise. A practitioner of Yoga is called a Yogi (unisex term) or Yogini (for female).

Eight-Limbed Yoga

The concept of “Ashtanga Yoga” or “Eight-Limbed Yoga” is a core characteristic of practically every Raja yoga variation taught today. The Eight Limbs are:

Right: Photo of students doing yoga, from the Berkeley Lab Archive. (This work is in the public domain in the United States because it is a work of the United States Federal Government under the terms of Title 17, Chapter 1 Section 105 of the US Code.)



(1) Yama (The five “abstentions”): non-violence, non-lying, non-covetousness, non-sensuality, and non-possessiveness.

(2) Niyama (The five “observances”): purity, contentment, austerity, study, and surrender to god.

(3) Asana: Literally means “seat”, and in Patanjali’s Sutras refers to the seated position used for meditation.

(4) Pranayama (“Lengthening Prana”): Pra-na, life force, or vital energy, particularly, the breath, “a-ya-ma”, to lengthen or extend. Also interpreted as control of prana.

(5) Pratyahara (“Abstraction”): Withdrawal of the sense organs from external objects.

(6) Dharana (“Concentration”): Fixing the attention on a single object.

(7) Dhyana (“Meditation”): Intense contemplation of the nature of the object of meditation.

(8) Samadhi (“Liberation”): merging consciousness with the object of meditation.

Bhagavad Gita and Yoga

The Bhagavad Gita (“Song of the Lord”) uses the term yoga extensively in various ways. In addition to an entire chapter dedicated to traditional yoga practice, including meditation, it introduces three types of yoga:

- Karma yoga: The yoga of action
- Bhakti yoga: The yoga of devotion
- Jnana yoga: The yoga of knowledge

Hatha Yoga and Physical Health

Hatha Yoga focuses on shatkarma, the purification of the physical body as leading to the purification of the mind and prana, or vital energy. It is the style that many people associate with the word “Yoga” today. Because its emphasis is on the body through asana and pranayama practice, many western students are satisfied with the physical health and vitality it develops and are not interested in the other aspects of the other Yoga traditions.

The Lotus Position and Yoga

The lotus position is a cross-legged sitting posture which originated in representations and meditative practices of ancient India.

It is an established part of the Hindu Yoga tradition. The position is said to resemble a lotus, encourage proper breathing and foster physical stability.

Famous depictions of the lotus-posture include Shiva, the meditating ascetic god of Hinduism, and the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism.

The Lotus Position and Women

According to the traditional texts, Padmasana (the lotus position) destroys all disease and awakens kundalini energy (one’s dormant spiritual energy). It calms the mind. It stimulates the pelvis, spine, abdomen, and bladder and stretches the ankles and knees. In women it alleviates menstrual discomfort and sciatica and helps ease childbirth.

Below: Vishnu, seated in the lotus position on a lotus. The very picture of devotion, bare-bodied, head bowed, legs crossed and hands folded.



(This image is in the public domain).

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breathing. Tristan related yogic breathing to the breathing exercises offered by the Art of Living (AoL, a course offered in Manila), where many feel a tingling sensation through their body when they are not used to it. Many of us who have tried yoga recalled this initial tingling in our arms and legs due to the deep breathing alone.

In Bikram Yoga, classes can get up to 34 degrees Celsius. The poses, the smelly classmates, the thought that “it’s sooo hot in here,” and frustration over the teacher who holds the pose for a long time – these can cause stress. Outside of class, the stresses might be traffic, politics, or dealing with government, family or friends. By doing yoga, you become aware of how you respond to stress. Along the way, you will also find out which muscles are tight (e.g., hips, hamstrings, shoulders, etc).

Since you cannot change something you are not aware of, it is this awareness that begins the process of making positive changes in your life. The awareness may come simply from a subtle shift in perception. “In my life, there has never been a piece of cake that accidentally fell into my mouth. I put it there – even if I already had two slices already.” Tristan recalls the days when his self-awareness was much weaker than his appetite for sweets. Yoga tunes us into what we are doing. The idea is to know (be aware) of whether you are still hungry/how much you are eating/how someone makes you angry/how you can best

cope. Consider this awareness as being the discipline needed to manage our stress.

De-Stressing Bikram

Somewhat surprising was how Bikram was de-emphasized, until a question sprung from the group: What, or who, is Bikram? It is indeed yoga in all its facets that impassions Tristan.

Apparently, Hollywood actor Shirley MacLaine brought Bikram (a guy from Calcutta who said, “go spread yoga to the west”) to the world. While Bikram as a person does not win Tristan’s respect, the series of 26 poses known as Bikram-style yoga does – thanks to both the physical and mind benefits that Tristan has personally derived from his practice. “It’s hard in the beginning because people don’t know how to breathe. It’s a conditioned response,” says Tristan.

Following are some of the physical benefits cited by Bikram Yoga clients: Back pain gone. Weight loss. Varicose veins disappearing. Greater movement possible in previously painful joints. Better management of asthma. Better blood circulation. Pores are open. T-cell count goes up. Building tensile strength rather than ballistic strength (what you build when at the gym). More patient. Less angry. More focused.

We ended with a demonstration of two yoga poses that we could do every morning at home: the sun salutation, and the spinal stretch. As a good instructor should, Tristan made sure to show us not only the perfect

form for each, but also how we might over-do them – so we knew just how far to stretch to derive personal benefit from each.

Bikram Yoga Manila offers 90 minute classes as well as an introductory package of 3 classes in 7 days for Php1,000. For more information, please visit www.bikramyogamanila.com or call 889-0126. Tristan Choa can be reached at 0917 805-1159. ■

Manila Women’s Forum

Manila Women’s Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Shari Virjee**, MWF Membership Message Board and Assistant Chair. **Cecilia Leung** and **Julia Holz**, Programs. **Lisa Stuart**, MWF Membership Message Board Moderator. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 813-0168, or at lumbao@mozcom.com for more information about MWF.

Visit our website – a work in progress
www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum

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