

A sense of peace and serenity pervades Joanna Manning's yoga studio in Moncton. The lights are low and soft music plays as her gentle Welsh accent guides the class through a relaxation meditation, encouraging them to leave behind their day-to-day stressors and be fully in the present moment for the next hour, beginning with a series of stretches and exercises to center the breath before chanting the mantra, "OM."



"OM is the sacred sound of the universe," Manning explains, "and for yogis, no sound is more powerful. It's believed the Latin word, 'Omne' and the Sanskrit word 'Aum' are both derived from the same root, meaning 'all.' It's recommended the OM mantra be recited every morning and evening. This will charge your nervous system with positive vibrations and energy, reducing stress in body and mind. When the mind is quiet and empty of thoughts, the systems and internal organs relax and blood pressure is reduced. Repeating OM brings peace and serenity to the mind."

Yoga does have movement; however, as the class begins the Sun Salutation, which Manning describes as "a graceful sequence performed as a continuous flow, each posture counteracts the previous one, stretching the body in a different way and alternatively expanding and contracting the chest to regulate breathing."

Yoga has a beneficial effect for her students. Josée Bourgeois, who began yoga two months ago,

says "Already I feel so much more relaxed, more limber and flexible. It's a great de-stressor." Tara MacArthur has been practicing for seven years and says, "It balances everything. It's a passion and brings energy to my life."

Sylvie Blanchard-Crowley did yoga before, during and after the birth of her second child. "It made me more flexible and the deep breathing provided extra oxygen during labour," she says. "Coming to yoga class once a week gave me time to focus and bond with my new baby before he was born."

A scan of the Yellow Pages or an Internet search indicates a growing number of studios and classes teaching the art of yoga, an ancient Indian practice combining meditation with physical postures. It's taught in private studios, church halls, at UNB in Fredericton and at YMCA's everywhere. Chris Robichaud, Manager of Health, Recreation and Fitness at Moncton's Y says "Yoga has crossed over into mainstream health fitness programming."

The Y offers lunchtime yoga to executives. Football and hockey players practice it to improve their flexibility. Instructor Priscilla Cole, who came to yoga through her education in kinesiology at York University, smiles when she talks about "macho football players twisting themselves into pretzels." She sees yoga as the missing piece of the fitness puzzle. "People come to the Y for cardiovascular endurance training, and to strengthen and tone muscles but without yoga they are neglecting an important component of the total package. Yoga provides flexibility, relaxation and focus."

Not only is yoga now "mainstream", it has entered the technological age with the introduction, just over a year ago, of the wildly popular Nintendo Wii Fit Balance Board on which people can practice yoga postures at home. There's even yoga-inspired fashion to be found at Lulu Lemon chains, with 100 outlets across North America. The closest one to us is in Halifax, but yoga fashionistas can shop online. And now there is "hot" yoga or Ashtanga Yoga with harder, faster movements in demanding sequences, designed mainly for young men, and done in studios heated to 35 degrees Celsius.

Most recently, Punk Rock Yoga, which originated in Seattle in 2003 in an attempt to attract teenagers to the program, has appeared on the scene at Boom nightclub in downtown Fredericton.

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The 5,000-year-old Indian tradition has become trendy.

Kathryn Downton of Fredericton, the founder of Lifesong Yoga, puts this into perspective. "Yoga is in a state of evolution and continues to evolve as our culture evolves. The ancient form as it developed over thousands of years in India was a serious, spiritual task and involved intensive study in which a guru taught an individual over a long period of time. The group of physical postures which most people recognize is Hatha Yoga, making up only eight per cent of the total study of yoga. It was brought to North America in 1930 since it is conducive to group instruction. It focuses on helping people in our modern western society deal with issues resulting from our largely sedentary lifestyle such as back and shoulder pain, unhealthy eating patterns and immune system diseases, including arthritis.

Downton, who has been teaching for fifteen years, is the only Certified Viniyoga teacher and therapist in the Maritimes, after completing a five year Master's teacher training program with Claude Marachal of Belgium in 2002 and she continues with advanced training every year. Since the fall of 2007, she has offered the teacher training program in Fredericton, which takes between three to five years or 700 hours to complete. "Viniyoga can be translated from the Sanskrit as 'gradually and intelligently proceeding at your own pace toward your goals,'" she says. Downton will offer a new teacher training program beginning September 2009.

To fill the need for trained yoga instructors in Moncton/Dieppe/Riverview, Jody Myers, of the Halifax-based Atlantic Yoga Teacher Training institute, announced this week they will offer their 200 hour certification program beginning September as well.

Manning is pleased as she believes solid training for instructors is vital. She began her own training in Great Britain, completed a two year program at the Ontario Yoga Association and did advanced studies in India. "Training makes it possible for the teacher to recognize difficulties the students are dealing with and to modify postures for individuals with issues ranging from pregnancy, hypertension, retinal problems, injuries, MS, or post-surgical recovery." She continues, "Teaching is both an honour and a responsibility in that people come to you

and they trust you to help them."

Lisa Rotter was introduced to yoga as a stressed-out 18-year-old. After experiencing the balance and relief from stress that yoga provided, she wanted to teach others. She completed her certification in Calgary and taught there for 10 years before coming to Moncton to open Body Wise Yoga Studio. She speaks of the role yoga plays in balancing emotions and in self-acceptance. "Yoga enhances mood, calms anxiety, and decreases depression," she says, "and has a huge effect on your ability to accept yourself and love your body for both its strengths and weaknesses. It's a wonderful alternative to prescription drug use and students find that they benefit both physically and psychologically." Rotter hopes to expand. She has had 500 people come through her studio door in the last three years and there just isn't room for everyone who wants to come.

Meanwhile there are two interesting initiatives happening in Fredericton. June 20 has been designated "Yoga Day", during which time there will be free events happening around the city, offered by the Yoga Teachers' Association. Then, beginning the first Wednesday in July through the last Wednesday in August, at 7:00 p.m., certified instructors will be at the Lighthouse Deck on the River Walking Trail, demonstrating different yoga traditions. "Lighthouse Yoga is a 'low key' event," Downton says, "and people with no experience are invited to drop in. This is more like a 'taste testing' session, than an introduction. Participants should bring their own mats, and make a donation to charity, as there is no fee."

Downton is passionate about what she does and wishes everyone could have a yoga moment, which she describes as a desired state of being, where the body, mind and spirit come together. "It's one of those rare moments where everything is the same on the outside, where you may still have the same financial or relationship worries, but something has changed on the inside and you realize that everything is okay and it's good to be alive."

For more information on some Moncton and Fredericton Yoga studios, visit:

www.bluelotusyoga.ca (Joanna Manning, Moncton); www.bodywiseyoga.com (Lisa Rotter, Body Wise Yoga Studio, Moncton); www.lifesongyoga.com (Kathryn Downton, Fredericton)