

# IYTA in Australia

## A Continuing Evolution

The International Yoga Teachers' Association (IYTA) is one of Australia's longest-established and most well-respected yoga organisations. Founded by Roma Blair and a group of like-minded yogis in 1967, the IYTA was formed at a time when yoga teachers were few and far between. Roma Blair's vision was to draw together all the yoga teachers in Australia, as well as teachers from overseas. A grand vision. IYTA would help to provide fellowship, support, and on-going learning.

This article first looks at the beginnings of IYTA, especially through the eyes of two long-term members. It then describes what IYTA does today, including the main activity of providing a teacher training course. Then the article examines the challenges facing IYTA as it seeks to continue to foster a sense of community in these busy times. Newly elected IYTA President, Patricia Wigley, offers her vision for the future of IYTA in yoga in Australia.

### The beginnings of IYTA

"The IYTA really began at St Ives, Sydney," comments Anne Sharpen, an early member. "All those fine people:

Elsa and Hans Rabold, Dorothy Potter, Amoona Jordan (Metcalf), Roma Blair, John Mumford, John Cooper, Matthew O'Malveney, and Joy McIntosh were in it, along with the Janssens." Margo Hutchison from South-East Queensland has also been a member since the early days. "The IYTA at its inception was pretty forward-looking," she says, referring to the vision of drawing together yoga teachers from around Australia and overseas. "As far as I am aware, it was the earliest international yoga association in the world."

Soon after starting, IYTA began forming branches around the world including in Spain, South Africa, and South America. Frequent yoga conventions were held, inviting leading international yoga figures such as Swami Satyananda, Swami Kriyananda, Swami Venkatesananda, Swami Gitananda and Swami Satchidananda, to Australia. Other great yogis such as BKS Iyengar, Andre van Lysebeth, Michael Volin, Liliias Folan, and Howard Kent were early visitors brought out by IYTA. Other well-known leaders of different traditions, such as Swami Maheshwarananda of

Yoga in Daily Life, were first hosted by IYTA in the early 1990s in Sydney. Mansukh Patel, of Dru Yoga, visited with IYTA before Dru Yoga had become well-known here in Australia. Mark Whitwell, a student in the '90s of TKV Desikachar, also brought those teachings to

Australia, and commenced at a time when formal yoga teacher training was not widely undertaken. Since then, over 2,000 students have graduated from the course and are practising around the world. Offering a wide-ranging curriculum, it actively encourages

enjoy fellowship around the world. Being an international organisation means that members have their yoga teaching qualification recognised around the world.

IYTA is also active around Australia. Most states have a state representative, supported by a committee. Workshops and many other important member activities are organised at the State level, to support members in their ongoing learning, and in their sense of belonging to a yoga community. There are two types of IYTA membership: subscriber, and full. Anyone interested in yoga can become a subscriber. To become a full member, the main way currently is to successfully complete IYTA's teacher training course, either in Australia, or in selected overseas countries.

## The IYTA started as a way to help bring together yoga teachers in Australia.

Australia before Desikachar himself visited Sydney in 1995.

Since its inception, IYTA has been an organisation run largely by volunteer members. Margo Hutchison describes how she came to join IYTA. "For me, the attraction was that it was widely based in its philosophy and ideology. It encompassed all styles and traditions of yoga and you could learn to teach yoga without having to teach one primary style. And it was an international organisation. I enjoyed attending the conventions which were stimulating and exciting. It was a great way to learn about yoga in those days, when it was often hard to find information." Adele Egan, also a long-term member, and State Representative for South-East Queensland, adds: "You had to search for knowledge back then. And the IYTA was bringing out all these great teachers – the learning was great." Adele explains how learning to teach yoga was very different in those days. "It was a different style. There was no need to know a lot about parts of the body. Yoga knowledge was handed down from a master, and that's what you took in. You didn't question anything."

### What IYTA stands for today

IYTA's vision has helped to extend and deepen the practice of yoga in the lives of many thousands of people in Australia and around the world. IYTA has always aimed to promote the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual benefits of yoga for everybody, regardless of age, sex, ability or disability, ethnicity, or religion. To help achieve this, IYTA remains active in the training of yoga teachers, particularly in Australia. Established in 1973, the course was one of the first in

participants to think about how yoga principles, psychology, and philosophy apply in their everyday lives.

Many students find that the course opens up their lives in unexpected ways. Some have chosen to join with the voluntary work of IYTA, to help keep their close connection with the organisation. For example, Rosemary Pearson is a long-serving member on the Committee of Management. She joined after completing the course in 1991. Rosemary explains, "I was so inspired by the concept of IYTA and its achievements, I wanted to actively support its ongoing development."

Graduates of the most recently completed course have been similarly inspired. Gail Hay and Mari Notaras have both put their hand up to help with IYTA's upcoming yoga convention in September 2010. "It's great to be involved with a group of individuals who share a common interest in bringing yoga to the community", comments Mari. Gail adds: "Knowing we have the ongoing support of the IYTA once our training is completed is important to new teachers as we begin our independent classes. The international convention provides us with an opportunity to expand our knowledge and assists us in building a professional network which will help us to further develop as yoga practitioners."

### Other activities: national and international

IYTA publishes a quarterly yoga journal for its members, *International Light*. IYTA has branches, contacts, and members in 26 countries. Conventions, as well as more informal gatherings, provide opportunities for members to

### Fostering a sense of belonging

What has kept long-term members such as Margo and Adele involved in IYTA over the years? For Adele, in her role as State Representative for South-East Queensland, the priorities are clear: "I work on encouraging people to attend interesting workshops for their professional development, on supporting the teacher training course students in Queensland, and bringing together like-minded people to share and be friends." For Margo, who is also on the South-East Queensland committee, the camaraderie is important. "I feel I belong – I'm a yoga teacher, and I belong to the IYTA. It's an organisation with integrity, and I enjoy being part of it." Margo adds: "There is a great deal of responsibility for the rep. in running an IYTA State branch, but there is also great joy that comes from being involved at that level with other teachers who have similar ideals. I've developed some very close and enduring friendships during the 40 years of my involvement with IYTA."

### Challenges and future opportunities for IYTA

Patricia Wigley is the newly elected President of IYTA. Patricia has served with IYTA for a number of years, including on the NSW committee as Editor for the NSW newsletter, and on the Committee of Management as editor of *International Light*, the newsletter of the organisation.

For Patricia, a top priority is to continue to support the needs of all IYTA members – creating a sense of being part of a yoga organisation that is there for the benefit of its members, both those new to the organisation, and the long-established. This is especially challenging in these times when people lead very busy lives. “I think it’s a challenge for organisations such as ours”, comments Patricia. “We are very ready to look at new ways of involving and keeping in touch with our members, at the same time as honouring traditions that have been handed down to us.” An important aspect of this is continuing professional development. “IYTA will be developing this area in a much more formal way,” explains Patricia. “As for so many organisations, it is increasingly important for our members.”

### **Bringing the yoga community together**

Patricia feels the yoga community in Australia is drawing together more. “I think this has been helped enormously by all the hard work of the Yoga

Teachers Association of Australia (YTAA), in developing themselves as an umbrella organisation for yoga in Australia”, she observes. “We in the IYTA fully support further developing our sense of community in the yoga world.” The international convention in Sydney in September 2010 will involve a rich mix of yoga practitioners from IYTA and other leading yoga organisations, both nationally and internationally. “We are very excited about this opportunity”, says Patricia. “I think it shows that the way forward for the yoga community is about cooperation and sharing. In a sense, it brings us right back to where the IYTA started – as a way to help bring together yoga teachers in Australia. I find this very inspiring.”

Mary Shellens is secretary of the Committee of Management of IYTA. She enjoys teaching yoga at local schools and gyms. Mary also works as an executive coach, and a facilitator of practical personal growth courses. In her spare time she enjoys African drumming, belly dancing, and regenerating the local bushland.

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– MARGO HUTCHISON