

SIMON'S SYNERGY

INSPIRATION

Edited by Anya Kussler



A scientist with a heart for all things yogic: Simon Borg-Olivier chats to *Fitness Life* about his obstacle-ridden journey to balance, his purist food philosophy and the style of yoga he developed to cater specifically to the needs of the Western physique

LITHE, tanned, with greying black hair gracefully tied back in a ponytail, yoga teacher of 20 years Simon Borg-Olivier exudes boundless energy and calmness both at once. And when I turn up to an 'open class' at his Yoga Synergy School at Sydney's Bondi Junction, the Maltese-born, Australia-bred 43-year-old greets me with such warmth and sincerity that I instantly feel welcome in his world.

The part of his world I am exploring today is his yoga studio, an unassuming 'classroom' with the alluring aroma of incense lingering in the air. At the one end of the room, sitting on a small dais, is a picture

of the man who inspired and taught yoga to Simon's three main yoga teachers, Yogacharya T. Krishnamacharya.

It is within these four walls that Simon teaches the synergy-style yoga he and business partner Bianca Machliss developed to specifically meet the needs of the Western body. Yoga Synergy, in short, is a merger between elements of traditional Hatha yoga styles and Simon and Bianca's in-depth scientific knowledge of anatomy and physiology.

Wearing long black leggings, Simon demonstrates the art of his craft enthusiastically to our group of about

25 students. In his deep, soft voice, he describes in detail what each muscle and limb should be doing in each pose.

Following our 'physiology lesson' (which Simon says is essential so we perform the asanas correctly and avoid risk of injury), we spend about an hour and a half swiftly moving from posture to posture. We begin and end with flamenco-like nerve stretching or tensioning movements of our arms and wrists, followed by quiet meditation.

Afterwards, Simon bids each of his students farewell individually, shaking their hands and enquiring after their



wellbeing. Remarkably, he still radiates the same energy as he did before taking the class.

But Simon hasn't always been this picture of health and vitality – on the contrary. As a teenager, he says he didn't care much about his body, let alone about diet and exercise. Nor was his life entirely free of nicotine – or of chemicals for that matter. In fact, after completing a degree in molecular biology, he decided to study for another scientific degree (this time in genetic engineering), only to spend more time in a laboratory surrounded by toxic fumes and test tubes.

Eventually, in order not to end up entirely immobilised, Simon decided it was time to get active. So – as you did in the 1980s – he got on the aerobics bandwagon. Never one to do things half-heartedly, he went at it full throttle, attending aerobics classes twice a day between lectures. The result: shin splints, a knee injury and back problems. Engaging in other activities only compounded these problems, be it through tae kwon do, fencing or gymnastics, the latter of which fractured a neck vertebra that has left him with a stiff neck to this day.

After two years of recurring physical niggles, Simon went to his aerobics instructor for help and she gave him an exercise to do that significantly improved the condition of his knee: the yoga pose *supta virasana* (Lying Back Between Bent Knees). Happy that he'd finally found some relief, Simon asked his instructor for more similar exercises and consequently ended up in the Iyengar yoga class she was teaching. "I started off as the stiffest person in the room," he recalls.

Around this time, Simon reached burn-out stage, and the effects of more than two decades of chronic abuse finally came to roost when he collapsed in the lab one day. It made him realise it was time to seriously reassess his life. "I still love science, but I'd been stuck in a laboratory with radioactive chemicals and carcinogenic reagents with no one to talk to but myself and the test tubes. For someone who loves working with

people, this made me think: what am I doing here?"

Sceptical about the investigative surgery doctors recommended he undergo to get to the root of his health problems (most of which were digestive and included ulcerative colitis), Simon took matters into his own hands and began self-medicating with so-called cleansing diets. The initial outcome was disastrous: "I managed to get myself even sicker for a few months!"

Round two, however, proved to be the turnaround Simon needed to set him on a path to good health long term. Following three weeks in a silent personal retreat in NSW, stoically fasting on spring water, he spent six months alternating between two weeks of vegetable juices and two days of salads. This radical detox, Simon reminisces, "left me feeling completely clean, euphoric and full of energy", which is why, to this day, he adheres to a diet of just fruits, salads and vegetables. "Every once in a while I'll have some nuts," he smiles, "and initially I used to crave other foods, but not any more. I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything."

Simon's explanation for his commendable regime? He says to give the internal organs some rest from the effects of food; he believes the less and more natural food you eat the better. "I make sure that what I eat requires minimal processing and is fairly easy for the body to digest, assimilate and get rid of the wastes afterwards." He finds the best yoga comes when you don't eat at all, "but that's fairly extreme".

So, if the body saves all the energy that might have otherwise been zapped to digest food, maybe that's why Simon's yoga practice suddenly went from him being the stiffest to the most flexible person in his class when he changed his eating habits. Simon would certainly agree: "I reached a euphoric

state of health and vitality that I had never felt before, and it was all due to diet, breath and yoga." (Find out how Simon discovered the importance of breathing as a life-giving force that impacts everything, right through to the nervous system, in the book extract on page 25).

Through his 'diet reform' and yoga practice, Simon says one of the most important principles he learnt was that of *ahimsa* or non-violence. "If you treat your body in a harmful or aggressive way, you will pay a big price... practising without aggression, with an honest recognition of your limitations and with a non-competitive attitude, brings about inner calm instead of frustration, jealousy and injury."

He certainly practises what he preaches, I think to myself as I chat to Simon about his fascinating life at his blue-terraced house in Newtown. Surrounded by the amicable chaos of his immediate surroundings – his wife Vitoria, five-month-old baby girl Amalia, business partner Bianca and an array of eclectic possessions, including a Buddha statue, guitar and paintings by Vitoria, a talented artist and floral stylist – the self-acclaimed 'hyper person' appears as calm and collected as he did when performing his asanas.



It is hard to believe that Simon once started off as the stiffest person in his yoga class.



"In yoga, you put your body through artificially induced stressful situations and you learn how to deal with them in a controlled environment."

"I look at the yoga exercises as a model for life," Simon explains. "In life there are stresses all the time and you have to learn how to deal with them. In yoga you put your body through

In 1988, Simon met his business partner to be, yoga teacher Bianca Machliss. They travelled around India studying with yoga masters such as BKS Iyengar and K Pattabhi Jois, and were introduced

worse, not better, and one day he ended up injuring himself. Other yoga teachers, he discovered, were going down the same road.

In their quest to get to the bottom of



I strive for a balance in my life between being a technically minded, intellectually orientated scientist and as someone who enjoys a free-form existence and intuitive movement. Yoga enables me to fulfil both



artificially induced stressful situations and you learn how to deal with them in a controlled environment. If I come across something stressful, I say to myself 'breathe and just do it like you would a yoga pose: one step at a time'."

As Simon became more involved in yoga practice, he progressed to teacher training in Oki-do yoga, a demanding Japanese-style yoga. After he first qualified, he began teaching yoga in Newtown and loved it so much that he still teaches there 20 years on.

Life didn't stop here for yogi Borg-Olivier though.

to more extreme practices such as ashtanga vinyasa yoga and more esoteric practices such as Mallakhamb – yoga on a three-metre wooden pole. In 1990, Simon and Bianca returned to Sydney to set up shop, Yoga Synergy. This is when they began developing the synergy-style yoga, which is still their hallmark today.

This style of yoga, once again, evolved based on Simon's personal experiences. From the first yoga class he attended in 1977 through to his fourteenth study trip to India in the mid 1990s, he felt that certain parts of his body, like his knees, lower back and neck, were getting

why he had injured himself (the opposite of what yoga is trying to achieve), Simon and Bianca returned to uni to study physiotherapy and exercise physiology. By doing so, they not only acquired a true understanding of exactly how the body worked but it also dawned upon the scientifically minded Simon that Westerners' and Easterners' physiology was quite different. Simon gives an example: "These [traditional] sequences assume lotus is relatively easy because Indians mostly sit cross-legged on the floor. They assume that the neck is already strong enough for inversions

because most Indians carry a load on their head." So, for Westerners to reap the full benefits of yoga and avoid injury, he adds, one "needs to address these differences between lifestyle and bodies with a warm-up of sorts." So, what Synergy Yoga is, in effect, is the synthesis of the knowledge Simon and Bianca have gained from traditional Hatha yoga and Western medical science.

In the time since its inception, Yoga Synergy has proven so popular that up to 1,000 students now flock to Simon and Bianca's school each week to study their art. They only accept a few teacher trainees each year, are about to release a DVD with their sequences for the public and also offer a course in the applied anatomy and physiology of Hatha yoga.

Apart from teaching up to three classes of YS a day, Simon never fails to set aside one to two hours for performing his own personal yoga ritual, preferably on the beach. "When you're teaching, it's

not true yoga practice," he says. "Yoga is introspective – to practise it one needs to enter a silent, personal space."

While Simon swims daily and enjoys the occasional walk or dance party, yoga is very much his main form of exercise, as much for keeping his body intact, as for mental clarity and spiritual balance. This is why each of his sequences comprise asanas that provide a cardiovascular, strength and flexibility workout, as well as meditation practice all in one hit. Yoga stands for 'union', where the mind and the body are connected and in harmony with the world. Simon Borg-Olivier, for one, appears to have truly achieved this.

He attributes a large part of this to his mother, whom he says has played an integral role in his development, both as a yoga teacher and person. "Since my childhood my Ma has infused me with a passion for life – she has done this mostly by example, because she is exactly like

this herself. Most of all she has taught me about love and what it is to be devoted to people or a cause – that it is okay to put time and effort into looking after yourself (by practising yoga, for example), if it will make you a better person because then you are more capable of helping others and making a useful contribution into society. My mother has helped me see that the yoga of life is about realising that our individual or 'higher' selves are truly one, but to connect with this idea we must firstly connect with ourselves."

The information for this article was sourced from research by Jane Riley and from material provided by the book Yoga The Essence of Life by Alix Johnson, published by Allen & Unwin, RRP\$32.99 (including GST). The book is available from all good book stores. The following extract is from the chapter 'Harnessing Energy', on Simon Borg-Olivier.

THE POWER OF THE BREATH

WHEN I was six years old my father, George Borg-Olivier, taught me how to swim underwater. He grew up in Malta. He didn't have much money when he was young, so he taught himself to dive to earn a living. Because the proper diving equipment was too expensive, he and two of his friends worked out how to hold their breath for long enough to skin dive into wrecked ships and stay there four or five minutes to retrieve objects and then return safely to the surface. Once he made the newspaper headlines because a school bus veered off a cliff and the driver was trapped deep under the water. My father happened to be there and dived into what was a freezing winter sea and was able to prise the door open and free the driver – all because he had taught himself how to hold his breath. He later taught me how to do this by taking slightly deeper than normal breaths and by gripping my chest and abdomen in such a way that I could retain the in-breath for longer. He also taught me the signs to watch for which indicate the breath has been held for long enough and

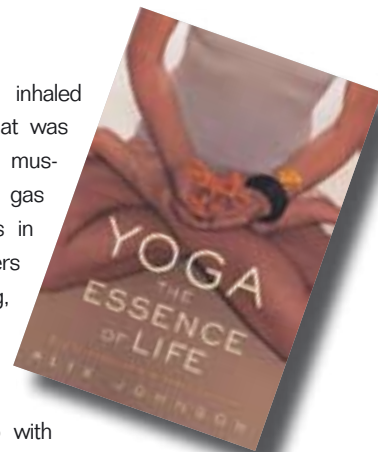
any longer would be dangerous. These instructions were the beginnings of what I would later come to know as *pranayama* – specifically *kapalabhati*, *bastrika* and *antara kumbhaka* [inhale retention].

When I was eight years old we left Malta and migrated via England to Australia. On the ship I met a Rhodesian Olympic athlete called Basil Brown who gave me instructions on how to do the same exercises that my father taught me but by holding my breath out. He also taught me how to perform some yoga breath techniques, such as *uddiyana bandha* [controlled expansion of the chest muscles which draws the abdomen inward], *navli* [isolating the rectus abdominis], *lauliki* [rolling the abdomen from side to side] and *bahya kumbhaka* [exhale retention].

What my father and Basil taught me would help save my life a decade later. When I was in my teenage years I had my 'junior scientist accident' where I inadvertently mixed a bunch of chemicals that caused a bright green flash, flames and an explosion of chlorine gas. Horrified,

I gasped and inhaled a cloud of what was equivalent to mustard gas. The gas caused lesions in my lungs, blisters along the lining, and I coughed so much I burst a lung and ended up with a pneumothorax. The doctors thought I was going to die. I was like a human beanbag with air pockets from my thigh to my neck and down my arms and as a result I developed asthma.

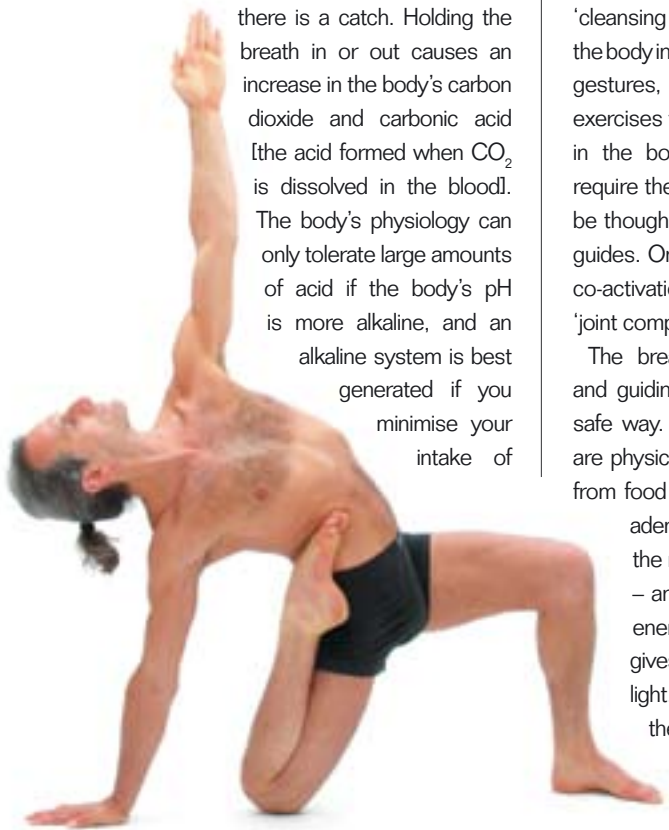
I discovered that the only thing that would ease the extreme wheezing was if I listened to my body. To alleviate asthma, all I had to do was comfortably hold my breath out or in for as long as possible and then not panic when I resumed breathing. To confirm this, the asthma came back when I was doing a lot of Iyengar yoga in Pune, which did not emphasise breath retentions presumably on the grounds of



safety, and when I was doing ashtanga vinyasa yoga, which tended to emphasise increased breathing and hyperventilation presumably to help increase abdominal and chest strength and help increase flexibility by alkalisng the blood.

When I resumed the breath retentions my body was profoundly affected, especially the spine. A full exhalation is related to *mula bandha*, and learning how to grip the lower abdominal muscles while a full inhalation is related to *uddiyana bandha* and learning how to expand the chest. This enabled me to lengthen my upper back and release my stiff neck. Although it is important to fully inhale and fully exhale, I learnt that if I took full breaths too often in a practice I felt destabilised and spaced out due to constriction of the arteries to the brain. Excessive pressures in the body generated during certain breathing practices, especially during breath retention, are potentially very dangerous, which is why BKS Iyengar and K Pattabhi Jois wisely caution against the premature teaching of pranayama.

Learning to retain the breath sounds straightforward enough but there is a catch. Holding the breath in or out causes an increase in the body's carbon dioxide and carbonic acid [the acid formed when CO₂ is dissolved in the blood]. The body's physiology can only tolerate large amounts of acid if the body's pH is more alkaline, and an alkaline system is best generated if you minimise your intake of



acidic-forming foods. When I began eliminating acid-forming foods like grains, processed foods and high-protein foods I did my best yoga. Conversely, the only way to sustain this sort of diet is to also engage in a *pranayama* practice which leads to a net reduction in the amount of air one breathes throughout the day. I am vegan and live on raw fruits, salads, and occasionally steamed vegetables. I haven't eaten bread or rice or legumes in years, and hardly ever any nuts. I know other people who have tried to eat like this only to end up extremely spaced out, emotionally labile or suffering adverse allergic reactions because they don't practise correct *pranayama*.

An underlying principle of Synergy-style yoga is the harnessing of energy, or *prana*. The ability to move *prana* around the body at will is an important aspect of *asana* practice and the correct use of *mudras* and *bandhas* can bring energy and blood to any organ in the body and can rid them of toxins or poisons that have accumulated. Breath control (or *pranayama*) is also used in most of the unique yoga exercises known as *kriyas* and *mudras*. *Kriyas* are 'cleansing processes' that literally purify the body inside and out; *mudras* are special gestures, postures and muscle-control exercises that regulate the flow of energy in the body. Most *kriyas* and *mudras* require the use of *bandhas*. *Bandhas* can be thought of as muscle locks or energy guides. On a physical level a *bandha* is a co-activation of opposing muscles of a 'joint complex'.

The breath is essential to managing and guiding *prana* around the body in a safe way. *Prana* is simply energy. There are physical forms of energy – like sugar from food that travels in your blood, and adenosine triphosphate (ATP) that is the main energy source of each cell – and there are energetic forms of energy, like the heat that your blood gives off. Then there is energy from light. I believe we are able to harness the energy of the sun in our body and this is why in India you see so many naked *sadhus* and

babas [yogis and holy men]. To cover themselves in clothes would be to lose their inherent abilities to absorb *prana* from the sun. Many molecules that we know to be part of the photosynthetic complex of plants are present in the body. The basic structure of haem – as in haemoglobin in blood – is almost identical to the structure of chlorophyll. I find it hard to imagine that something so structurally similar can have no functional similarity as well. This is one of the reasons that I generally practise outdoors and with minimal clothing.

Often in yoga classes people are told: 'Breathe!' The paradox is that if you take less breath the brain and the cells of the body actually get more oxygen (provided you periodically empty your lungs completely). This contributes to the saying that the yogi counts their life not in years but by the number of heartbeats and breaths they take.

When you hear people doing deep, fast breathing they are blowing off carbon dioxide before it has a chance to accumulate. The accumulation of carbon dioxide is a necessary stimulus that tells the blood vessels of the brain and lungs to open. If you breathe too much and diminish your CO₂ levels then the blood vessels shrink instead. Like the blood vessels to the brain, the bronchial tubes expand in the presence of carbon dioxide. Hence someone who hyperventilates (over-breathes) can end up with restricted oxygen levels and the possibility of having an asthma attack. Conversely, someone who hypoventilates (under-breathes) can get more oxygen into the lungs and therefore into the body's cells. This is of course an oversimplification as hyperventilation can be useful at times for the yogi for increasing flexibility, improving bowel movements and for preparing to hold the breath, but it is hypoventilation that leads the yogi to the more profound meditative states that characterise the essence of yoga. Hence, we place emphasis in our teaching on minimal breathing, taking long, slow breaths and increased breath retention for those who are able. 