

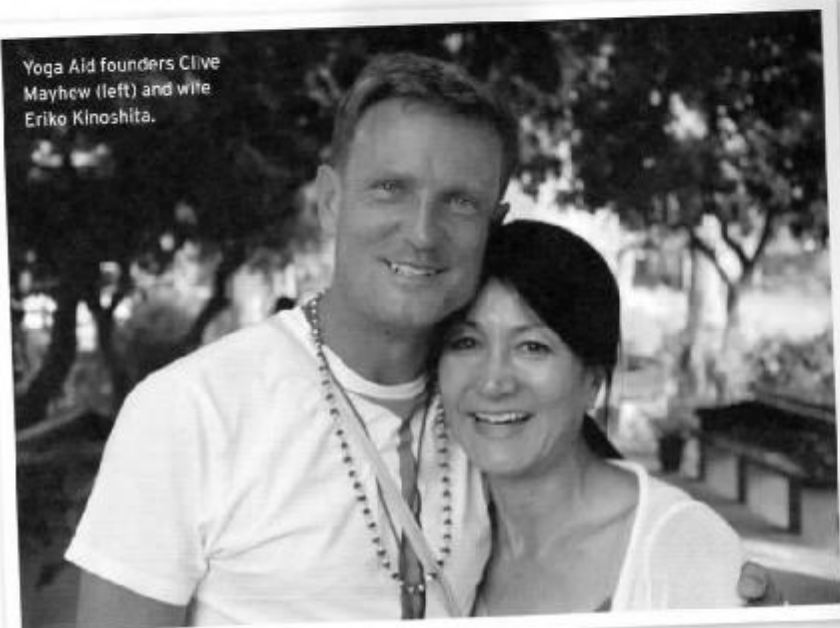
Sycneysiders participating  
in Yoga Aid's 2009  
fundraising event at the  
Royal Botanic Gardens.

# the power of *Community*

The heart of yogic philosophy pays dividends for community building and good causes alike. By Sue White

PHOTOGRAPHY: TARA MCKINNEY

Yoga Aid founders Clive Mayhew (left) and wife Eriko Kinoshita.



“By practising you’ll have a desire to give; we’re saying take that desire and give to the world.” CLIVE MAYHEW

“We had no intention of doing anything other than that, but we had 12 of the largest studios across the city offer to teach and 300 people turning up. It brought people together,” Mayhew says.

The simple idea—local yogis coming together to complete 108 Surya Namaskars (Sun Salutations) for charity—now runs in 11 countries, including the US, Italy and Japan, and has already

raised more than \$765,000 through direct donations to local charities. Uniting both teachers and styles, Yoga Aid events seem to mirror Mayhew’s own inclusive approach to yoga.

“Yoga is always changing and opening you to more,” Mayhew says, who started off practising Power and Bikram, but has now moved into a less physical practice. “As my body changes I’m older and stiffer and I need to be focusing on that.”

The growth of the event has also taught Mayhew the value of letting communities embrace their own take on a good idea, such as Yoga Aid Italy’s custom of taking regular coffee breaks throughout their Sun Salutations. “It works in their culture and their community,” says Mayhew. “We can’t go around the world and hosts events ourselves... we’ve got to let go and see what happens.” The wisdom of spiritual leader Swami Chidanand Saraswati (known popularly as Swamiji) has helped guide Mayhew along this journey. “Swamiji says he plants a seed in someone, waters that when he sees it and lets it grow.”

While yoga is the medium, there’s a deeper motivation to Yoga Aid. “It’s not so much about the yoga as a physical practice, it’s what yoga means beyond that,” Mayhew says. “We’re trying to get people thinking about just giving a bit more, and we’re asking people to make giving a part of their life. It could be money, time to other people or thought to the world you’re living in. By practising you’ll have a desire to give; we’re saying take that desire and give to the world.”

### The Yoga of Giving

Although events like Yoga Aid serve as a useful annual prompt, the connection between yoga and giving goes way back. Yogic philosophy informs practitioners that happiness comes not from hoarding time, energy, money or possessions for ourselves, but from living in a way that considers the wellbeing of all. Perhaps the best reminder comes from the ancient sage, Patanjali, whose eight limbs of yoga form the very framework



A Yoga Aid event in India, one of the eleven countries that participate annually.

of hatha philosophy. So important is the idea of compassion to yoga that Patanjali outlined it as yoga's first ethical precept, the practice of *ahimsa*.

While *ahimsa* is directly translated as "non-harming", it's more actively understood as the idea of compassion for all living things. The ethic encourages us to give thoughtful consideration to all our actions, and to strive to live a life filled with compassion for all beings, regardless of whether we know them, like them or believe in their approach.

If that seems like plenty of food for thought, don't forget the yogic practice of *seva* (selfless service). Sometimes known as karma yoga, *seva* is giving in action, and it can involve the offering of time, energy and compassionate thoughts. The only catch to *seva* (as Krishna advised the warrior Arjuna in another key yogic text, the *Bhagavad Gita*) is that the giver can't have any hidden agenda. Give freely, from the heart—this is the yoga.

It's a philosophy well understood by some of the more traditional yoga lineages. In Brisbane's Fortitude Valley, Yoga In Daily Life centre manager Craig Smith (Prabhupuri) joins his peers in providing free yoga to various external community groups as an act of *seva*. "Yoga In Daily Life comes from a traditional yoga lineage that's all about giving, it's not the commercial exchange sometimes seen here in the West. We are encouraged to do that through our work," he says.

Over the years, Smith, 43, has taught free classes for carers, cancer patients and various groups in need. "I've been teaching at a centre supporting people who have difficulties getting into the workforce, perhaps because of emotional or mental health issues," he explains. "Yoga helps them with tools they can use straight away—I might teach the full yogic breath so they can release stress before an interview."

Having started yoga himself due to health conditions and anxiety, Smith knows personally how the tools of yoga can help. "Guided relaxation and yoga nidra really help keep people with cancer out of anxiety when they're lying around waiting for treatment—



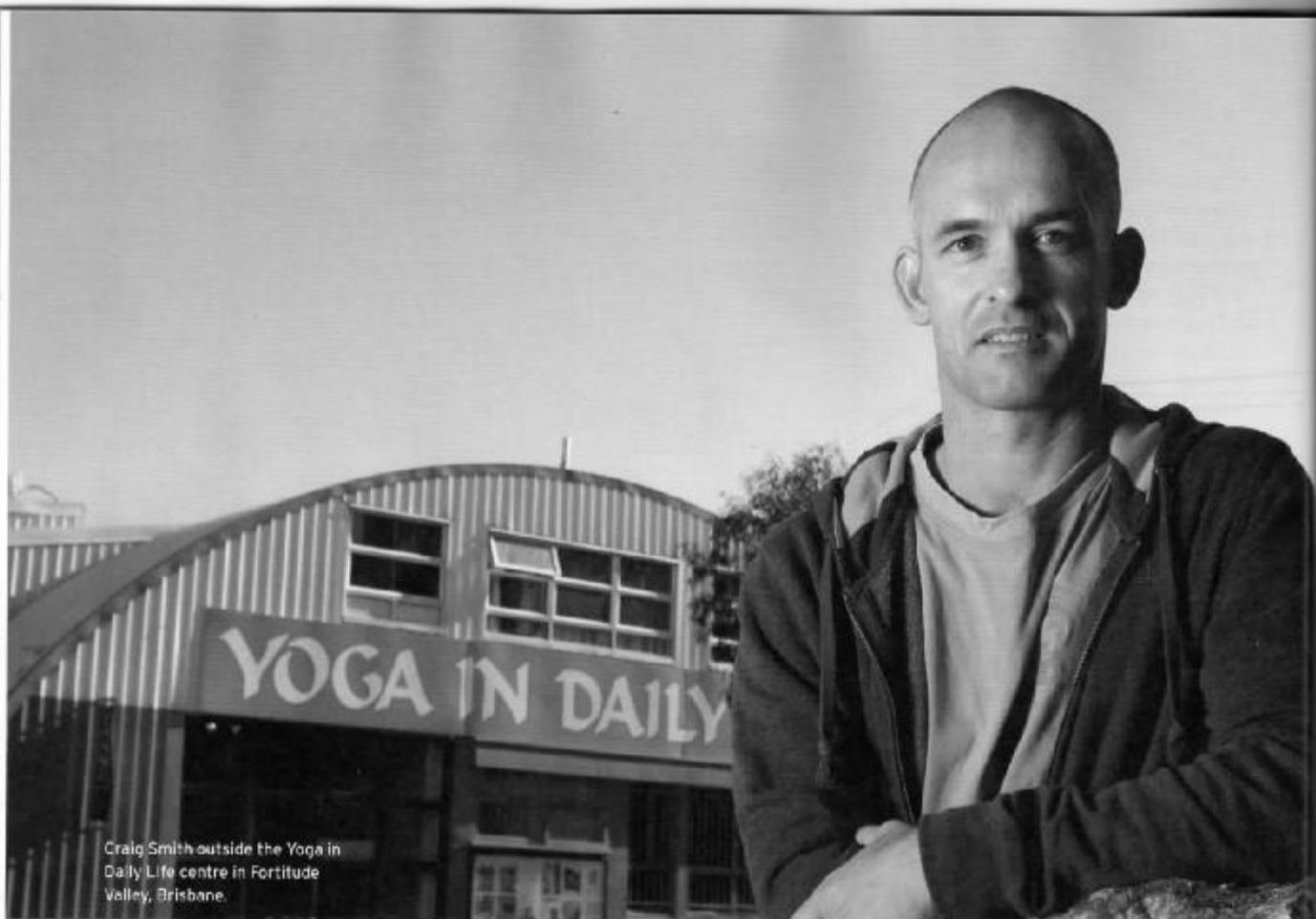
Yoga Aid participants complete 108 Sun Salutations to raise money for existing charities.

Sometimes known as karma yoga, *seva* is giving in action, and it can involve the offering of time, energy and compassionate thoughts.

it's simply teaching them how to slow their mind," he says. "Every week I also teach a class for carers of cancer patients. Sometimes they are more stressed than the patients themselves, because patients are being looked after by doctors, nurses and support services," he says.

#### Community Building

As recognition of the value of yoga spreads through modern society, umbrella organisations like the Yoga Aid Foundation are popping up. Set up via a donation from Mayhew and Kinoshita's family trust when they retired, and a separate entity to the Yoga Aid events



Craig Smith outside the Yoga in Daily Life centre in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane.

“Yoga In Daily Life comes from a traditional yoga lineage that’s all about giving... we’re encouraged to do that through our work.”

CRAIG SMITH (PRABHUPURI)

(which even itself doesn’t take money—all funds raised go directly to participants’ nominated charities), the private foundation links funding, teachers and worthy organisations through yoga.

The foundation’s charity director, 24-year-old Mayumi Staley (Mayhew’s stepdaughter) is grateful she found her calling early. “I fell into this when our family started the foundation,” says Staley. “I was doing a commerce degree at the time but I wasn’t passionate about it. The minute I started doing this I found my passion. I didn’t think about where it would take me, but now I travel so much—meeting people who have become activists in their field through yoga. I like to connect them all together,” she says.

One of the international projects that the foundation has supported is The Africa Yoga Project, developed by Paige Elenson, a friend of Staley’s who visited Kenya and stopped to talk to some acrobats she saw on the side of the road. “It’s turned into a huge community

of yogis,” explains Staley. They’ve now trained more than 40 teachers, aged between 16 and 30 years, who are paid to go out and find different classes. They teach yoga in slums, prisons and schools. These people are standing up as peace ambassadors in their communities,” she says.

Back at home there is no shortage of valuable projects, with Staley emphasising that the Foundation is always interested in supporting grassroots programs around Australia. The Foundation recently supported a pilot yoga program with Sunnyfield—a NSW centre for people with disabilities—and have also approached by a South Australian group to work with indigenous women to develop their own yoga style for their economic benefit.

But Staley and her colleagues are aware that the evolution of such programs ultimately rests with the communities themselves. “In some ways we like five-year plans, but we put things into the

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL HARRIS

hands of communities and it just goes where it wants to go. Even the teachers get so much from it. Teaching in this way seems to remind them of why they started teaching yoga," she says.

It's a statement Katie Manitsas would no doubt agree with. The founder of Sydney's Samadhi Yoga (a for-profit business) has worked hard to maintain the school's commitment to building a local, supportive yoga community. "One of my goals is that no-one is turned away from doing yoga if they can't afford it," Manitsas, 32, says. We have lots of different opportunities to do yoga, from volunteering through to \$8 and \$5.50 classes. We also offer scholarships on our teacher training program in exchange for people's skills, which could be anything from web design through to delivering flyers."

Motivated by her own early journey managing a high-profile yoga school in London, Manitsas saw her move to Australia in 2002 as a chance to do things differently.

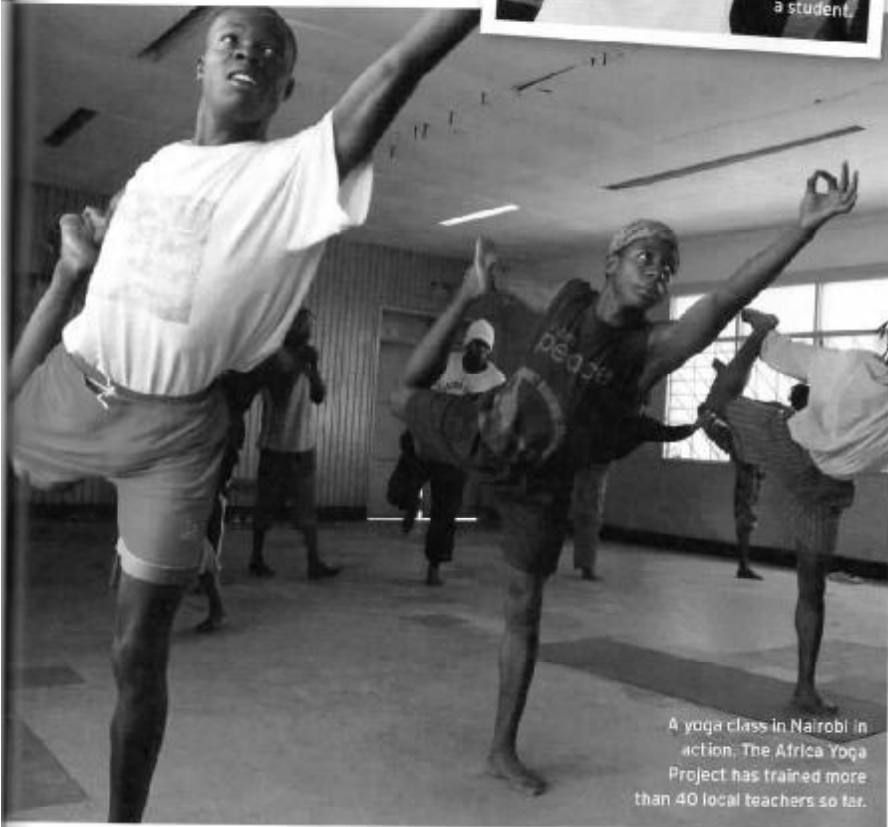
PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHNSON HUNTER, BOTTOM RIGHT: PAUL HARRIS

"The business in London was set up and run by a board of investors, so the focus was very much on revenue. That's fine, but it was also very frustrating," she says.

Deliberately setting an intention that



Paige Elenson (top) assisting a student.



A yoga class in Nairobi in action. The Africa Yoga Project has trained more than 40 local teachers so far.

## Great givers

The yoga community has brought about some incredible acts of charity and goodwill. Read on, get inspired and get involved!

**Yoga Aid Australia** The 2010 Yoga Aid Australia challenge runs on November 14 in various locations across the country. All funds raised go to charity. Sign up at [www.yogaaid.com/australia](http://www.yogaaid.com/australia)

**Africa Yoga Project** This US-based foundation uses yoga to empower communities in East Africa. Programs include teacher training, free yoga classes and a circus that travels to violence-affected areas. Learn more and donate at [www.africayogaproject.org](http://www.africayogaproject.org)

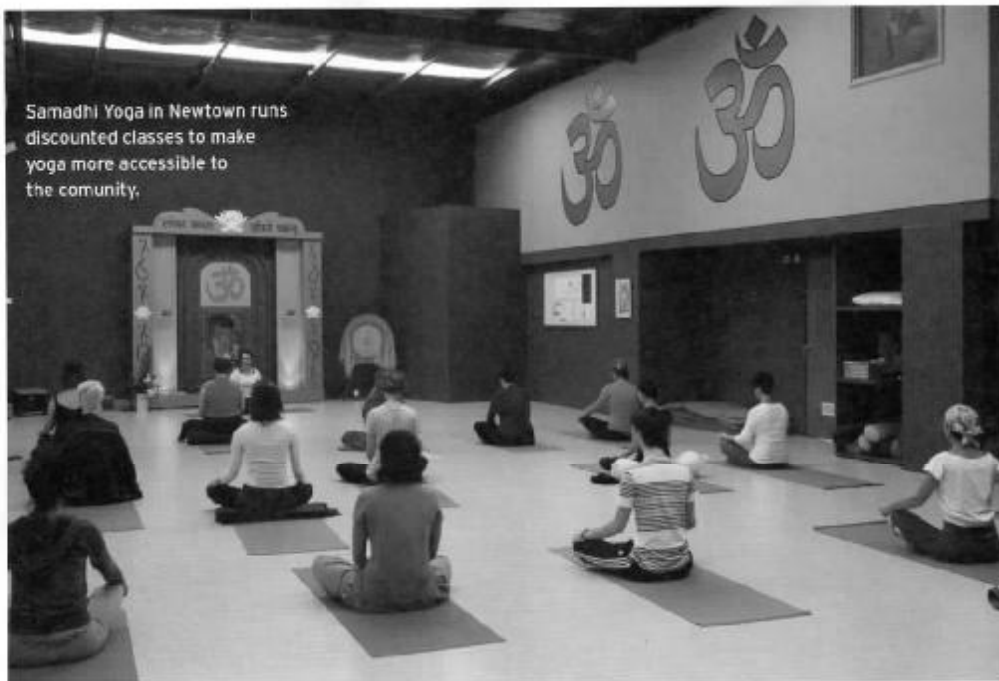
**Off the Mat and Into the World** A US-based organisation that encourages grass roots activism around the world by training community leaders and running "Global Seva Challenges", where participants raise \$20,000 to support a community in crisis. [www.offthematintotheworld.org](http://www.offthematintotheworld.org)

**Yoga In Daily Life** A non-profit yoga and community organisation. Teachers work voluntarily at yoga centres around Australia, which raise money for various aid projects. [www.yogaindailylife.org.au](http://www.yogaindailylife.org.au)

**Sahaja Yoga** A UK charity that runs free meditation courses for the public across the UK as well specific programs in prisons and universities. [www.sahajayoga.org](http://www.sahajayoga.org)



Samadhi Yoga in Newtown runs discounted classes to make yoga more accessible to the community.



“One of my goals is that no-one is turned away from doing yoga if they can’t afford it.” KATIE MANITSAS

Katie Manitsas has fostered a culture of generosity and sharing within a commercial business.



her own yoga studio, based in the inner-city suburb of Newtown in NSW, would be a place of *satsang*—a community of “truth seekers”—Manitsas has spent the last eight years proving that commercial businesses can make a difference in their own community. “A lot of people think community-based businesses must be non-profit. I think that’s not true. I was very inspired by [The Body Shop founder] Anita Roddick’s model, she was profit-driven but ethical.”

Maintaining a focus that yoga should be accessible has required tenacity and

perseverance. “When we started running \$5 classes everyone said we were crazy,” recalls Manitsas. “They just thought it was madness. But those classes [now \$5.50 and \$8] are a massive core of our community now, and we’re famous for it.”

The result is a place that many in Sydney’s inner city call home, and where volunteers come out of the woodwork to help with renovations, donate murals or simply join in the regular community events. It’s an evolution that still surprises Manitsas. “People don’t see us as a business, but a place of refuge where they can feel wholesomely good,” she reveals. Like Yoga Aid, the Samadhi Yoga community has grown through the commitment of a few inspiring people. “In the early days I was very hands-on, I was teaching a lot and answering the phone, I think that helped. But when you give a little bit extra to people, whether they’re staff, students or suppliers—really anyone you interact with—that comes back. It’s the law of karma,” Manitsas says.

“It surprises me how if you give people a little bit of kindness, and a little bit of love, it comes back. You just hold in mind an intention. You don’t necessarily know how it will manifest in nuts and bolts and details, but if you keep it in mind it *will* manifest,” she says.

However, sometimes the response does come in a nuts and bolts form. "We recently moved studios and were inundated by students and teachers offering to give us stuff, cook in our vegan cafe, or volunteer at working bees," Manitsas says. One student, Dave Potts, offered to make a communal table for the cafe out of a piece of red gum he'd been keeping in his garage for years. Another group helped build a community garden. "Now we're able to compost all the waste from the cafe there, as well as grow some of our own ingredients," she says.

If there is a secret to building community, it's having trust and belief in others, says Manitsas. "I've always really genuinely trusted my staff and teachers. If people say they worked, they did—for years here people paid themselves directly out of a money tin.

"Everyone has something to offer. Sometimes I get it wrong, but one of the reasons I get it right is that I have the opportunity to observe people as



Michele McDonald is one of the volunteers who helped build and maintain Samadhi Yoga's vegetable garden.

students before they work here. We've got plenty of people who started here as volunteers and ended up as teachers. I also really believe in the yoga itself. If you give people access to the teachings, you tap into the best side of their spirit. From that, anything is possible," she says.

For Mayhew, the most important part of community work is beginning

it. "Simply take the first step," Mayhew urges. "Do whatever you think is the initial project...what is there to lose? You're making a positive difference, so give it all your passion and energy and see where it goes." ❖

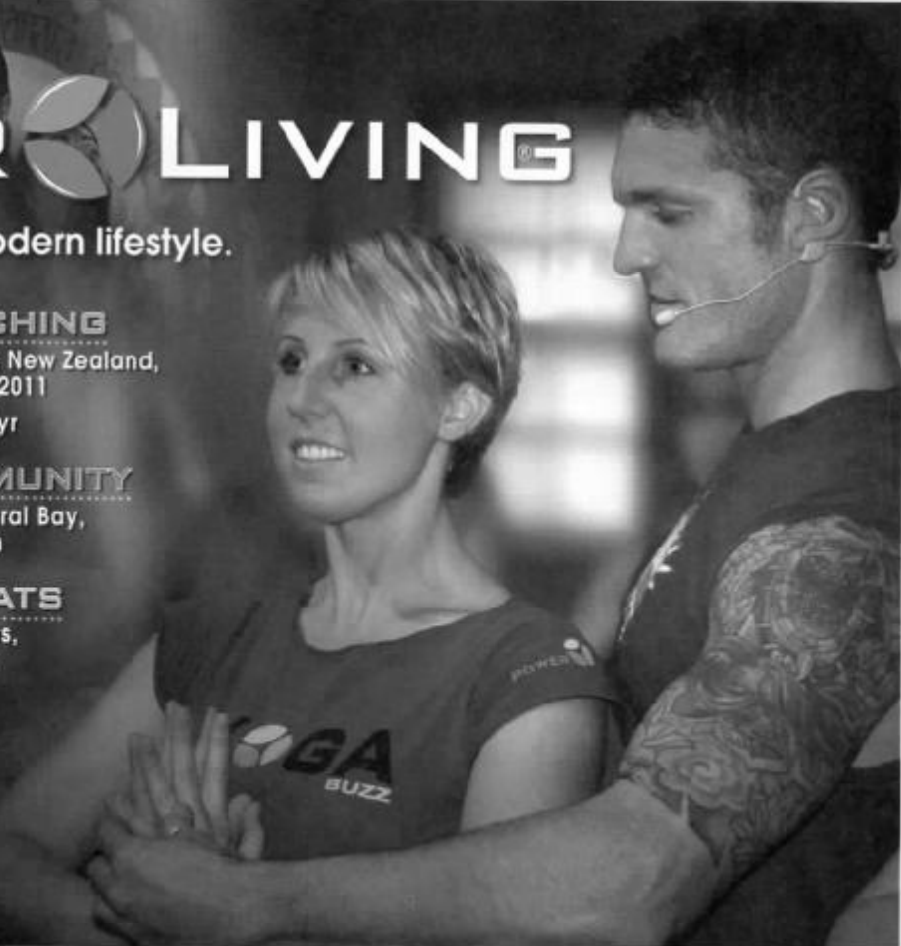
*Sue White is a Sydney-based freelance writer and long-time yoga practitioner.*

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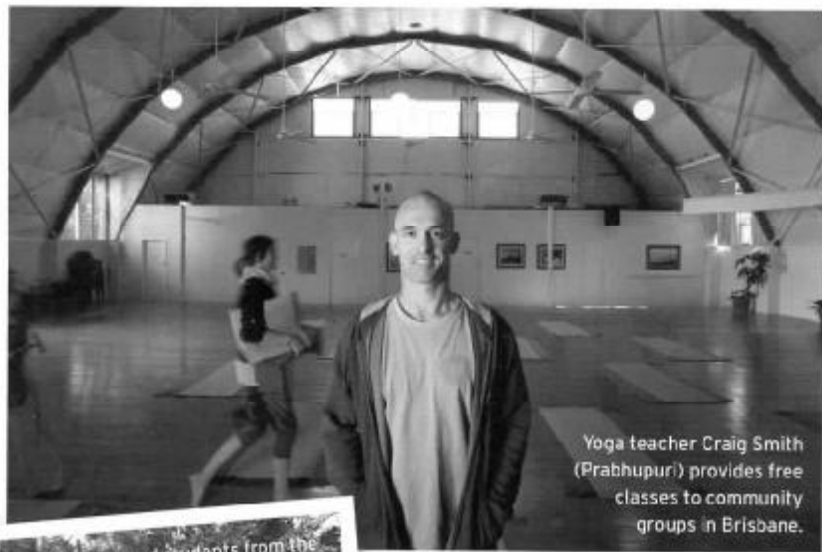
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Samadhi Yoga owner Katie Manitsas (left) and student Dave Potts (right) enjoying the communal table that Potts made and donated to the studio.



Yoga teacher Craig Smith (Prahupuri) provides free classes to community groups in Brisbane.



Yoga teachers and students from the Africa Yoga Project in Nairobi, with founder Palqe Elénson (far left) and supporter Mayumi Staley (bottom right).

Given that holidays to India have inspired thousands of modern yogis, it's hardly surprising that a 2007 visit by Sydneysiders Clive Mayhew and his wife, Eriko Kinoshita, left the pair with a desire to do more.

"We went to a yoga conference, and the message of the saints and sages there was that the whole purpose of life is to give back to the world," says Mayhew, 46, a retired software entrepreneur.

What followed was the emerging of the yoga community's premier fundraising event, Yoga Aid. "We came back and talked to a few friends about a yoga event in Sydney," explains Mayhew.