

heart of Anusara

Anusara may be relatively new in Australia, but this joyful approach to yoga is slowly making waves south of the equator.

By Sue White

Positioning forearms and elbows on my mat train-track style, I try to keep my mind from propelling forward into a pose I hate: Pincha Mayurasana (Forearm Balance). Instead of thinking about how uncomfortable I am, I focus on the advice of Sydney-based Anusara yoga teacher, Cassandra Missio. "Create inner spirals on your lower arms and outer spirals on your upper arms," she explains, before lifting her knees up to an easeful Forearm Balance preparation.

"Ah, can you see how the alignment focus helped my thoracic region open up?" she asks the group. "Ooh," my classmates and I moan in unison moments later, trying for the same outcome. It works, although it's not easy. But then Anusara yoga isn't about a lack of effort, instead, it's more reliant on what US founder John Friend calls attitude. "It's a view of the world and life that sees an auspicious, dancing joy at the essence of everything," says Friend of the style he created in 1997.

Back in my class, a joyful attitude is alive and well. As we glide through flowing vinyasa, pair up to help our neighbour with inversions and enjoy quiet reflection during the more static poses, Missio conveys the just-right balance of exuberance required in a practice where the heart is at the centre of things.

"What lays inside your heart?" she questions, talking the group through some backbend postures. "You haven't chosen to stay at home tonight and do a forward bend on the couch—you've chosen to open up. Why?" she probes.

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According to Anusara, the answer may well be to better live in harmony with others. The concept of community (known here as kula) is an integral part of the Anusara mix, and I later learn that for Missio it is the combination of Anusara's focus on biomechanics, community and life-affirming Tantric philosophy that attracted her to the style she's now taught for eight years. "After my teacher studied with John Friend his heart was so lit up. I thought: I want some of that," says the Anusara teacher who was certified in 2009 after completing years of teacher training.

ANUSARA IN AUSTRALIA

With only a handful of fully certified teachers spread across Australia (currently in Brisbane, Tasmania and Sydney, although a number of Anusara-inspired teachers also lead this style of practice), it's easy to be fooled into thinking this is a niche style of yoga. In fact, Anusara is practised in more than 100 countries around the world, with well-established communities in Japan, the UK, Europe and South America, as well as its birthplace in the US.

"It's such a beautiful way to practise," enthuses teacher Julie Smerdon, who recently opened Shri Yoga, an Anusara yoga studio in Brisbane. All certified Anusara teachers have to spend significant time training with Friend, which makes spreading the word about the style a slower process. "It's a matter of exposure. I lived in the US for eight years and did all my training then, so I was really excited to come here and spread the love," says Smerdon.

As the Australian community grows, a local sense of kula is building steadily. "Students [in kula] gather to practise together, train together and celebrate life together," says Friend.

"Members of the community all feel connected to one another, so when someone needs support in any way, they have many good-hearted friends who are there for them. Every member of the kula is dedicated to helping awaken others in the community to their unique greatness and beauty," he says.

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It’s a focus Friend will be living and breathing himself throughout 2011, as he undertakes his typically hefty global teaching load. “I’ll be giving positive, pragmatic teachings about how to live in harmony during these turbulent, critical times.”

WHAT TO EXPECT IN A CLASS

Students taking Anusara classes can expect a combination of flowing asana and yogic philosophy along with chanting, pranayama and meditation. “It’s a joyful and loving practice, but it’s also disciplined. There is an optimal alignment of a body in space, where everything expands, the circulation works better, everything flows better—your prana, lymph, organs—your karma expands,” says Smerdon.

There’s a language to learn as you practise this style. Although teachers will ease you into new terms, Anusara relies on expressions such as “spirals” to explain how to position your body. It mostly makes sense once you get used to it, and for people like Smerdon, the combined approach to practising this way has changed her life.

“It changed my physical body, my health and my spirituality. The philosophy is of intrinsic goodness,” she says. “Tantra gets a lot of weird press, but what it means is that at a fundamental level people are good, life is good and people are to be savoured. It’s joyful,” she says.

Back on my mat, listening to Missio’s voice soothe me through a well-deserved period of final relaxation, I am inclined to agree. After all, life is good, so why not? ❖

Sue White is a Sydney-based freelance journalist and long-time batba yoga practitioner.



A sense of community, known as kula, is strong in Anusara yoga classes, which foster bonds between students.