

“burning zeal in practice (*tapas*), self-study (*svadhyaya*) and surrender to god (*ishvara pranidhana*) are the acts of yoga”

THE YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI  
CHAPTER II, VERSE I



# Burning Zeal in Practice

a profile of Sydney teacher  
Simon Borg-Olivier

By Julie Shannon

A principle of the second limb of ashtanga yoga, *tapas*, is translated variously as fire, sturdy self-discipline and burning zeal in the practice of yoga. Well known in Sydney for his energy, enthusiasm, and dynamic physical practice, Simon Borg-Olivier exemplifies this element of *tapas*. His extensive work on the anatomy and physiology of hatha yoga and the direction he believes his practice is taking him also reveal a practitioner dedicated to self-study (*svadhyaya*) and passionate about passing on the benefits of yoga as well as the joy and spirituality to be found in yoga practice.

Simon has been practising and teaching yoga for over 25 years. In 1989 he teamed up with Bianca Machliss to create Synergy-style yoga, which he describes as a “dynamic, moving meditation.” Synergy yoga represents a synthesis of the traditional hatha yoga systems and is shaped by Western medical science, physiotherapy and years of observation and interaction with students. Simon and Bianca teach in and co-direct the three Sydney-based Yoga Synergy schools.

From an early age, Simon appears to have been destined for the path of a yogi. At only five years old, Simon’s father, an ex-diver, introduced him to breath retention techniques for underwater swimming. At the age of eight, family friend and Olympic athlete, Basil Brown, taught Simon Uddiyana Bandha (Abdominal lock) which Simon has practised regularly to this day and which now forms the core of his personal practice. In his late teens, Simon spent time with a visiting Tibetan Lama who introduced him to Tibetan yoga and the philosophy of yoga, and whose instructions and advice still resonate in him today. In his early twenties, Simon began a regular practice of hatha yoga, immediately demonstrating a keen desire to develop as a practitioner and to explore the possibilities of hatha yoga and *pranayama* (breath control techniques).

Since then Simon has drawn inspiration from a wide net of influences. Having completed teacher training in Oki yoga in 1984, Simon then studied Iyengar yoga with Eve Grzybowski in Sydney, and later with Sri BKS Iyengar and family in India. Over the years and during his many trips to India, Simon studied other yoga systems including the ashtanga vinyasa of Sri K Pattabhi Jois, the teachings of Sri TKV Desikachar and

his father Sri T Krishnamacharya, and also mallakhamb, an Indian gymnastic yoga that is practised on a three metre wooden pole. Simon states his gratitude for the years of study with these excellent teachers and acknowledges their teachings remain at the heart of his practice and the Synergy style.

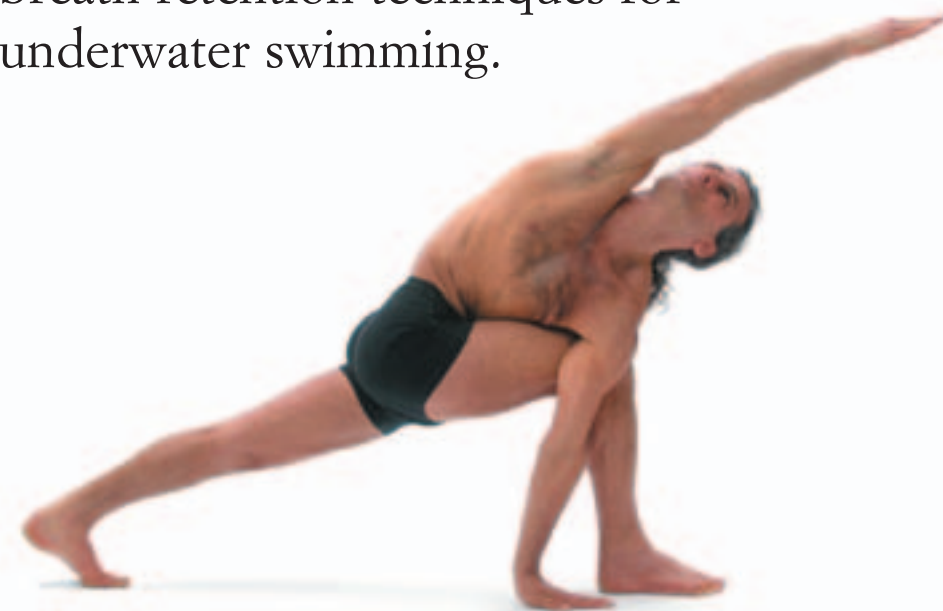
Eventually, however, Simon reached a point in his training where he felt obliged to branch away from these teachings. “After 10 years of immersion in yoga, I came to an impasse,” he explains. “The systems I had been taught were no longer serving my body in the way it needed and the injuries I had before coming to yoga, and that I thought yoga should be able to manage, remained a problem.”

In the classes Simon and Bianca both taught, they came across students struggling with similar problems and began to re-conceive their teachings as a holistic style that would benefit both themselves and their students. They observed that many of the styles of yoga being taught were not balancing strength with flexibility, that some styles were creating injuries in students through lack of understanding or explanation, while other styles were very intellectual and discontinuous and not

bringing about a meditative state in the practice. They began to reform their teachings into a holistic style that would benefit both themselves and their students. Inspired to explore other techniques to enhance their knowledge of the body and yoga, Simon and Bianca returned to university as mature-age students to study physiotherapy and qualify as physiotherapists. The insights they gained greatly added to their understanding and their approach to teaching yoga.

In particular, Simon and Bianca found that many styles of yoga did not address the needs of the average Western practitioner. The traditional interpretation of ‘*asana*’ is simply ‘seat’ or ‘a comfortable posture’ in which the body can sit for meditation. Yet, as Simon asks, “How can people ‘sit’ if they can’t get into a seated position?” In cultures such as those in Asia where sitting cross-legged and squatting are common, the average person does not usually struggle with hip flexibility, and many of the traditional yoga postures are more easily accessible. For the average Westerner, however, stiffness in the hips means an increased pressure is placed on the knees and the lower back when attempting to sit in positions such as Padmasana (Lotus

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pose) or simply cross-legged, and this can lead to injury. It was this example, among others, that made Simon and Bianca realise how important it was to modify traditional yoga sequences and postures for the average Western body, and also to make modifications for different levels and for different body types.

“We try to teach the body to work intelligently,” Simon explains. “If you take a strip of metal and keep flexing it back and forth it will start to bend only in the one spot, and eventually it will snap. The same is true for the body. Most people tend to have stronger, stiffer parts of the body, and weaker, more flexible parts. It is these weaker, more flexible parts where people tend to bend from the most, and which are therefore at greatest risk of injury. Therefore when practising hatha yoga it is wise to keep your weaker more

flexible parts more rigid and encourage flexibility in your stiffer parts.”

Simon and Bianca began to incorporate a number of different techniques into their sequences to train the body to work safely and effectively while attaining a dynamic meditative flowing practice. These include an emphasis on one-legged balances, joint stability and strengthening exercises, exercises that require joints and muscles to work through the full range of motion, cross-training techniques by approaching postures from different angles, and the use of non-traditional postures, such as Niralamba Ardha Chandrasana (Unsupported half-moon pose) and Niralamba Pavanmuktasana (Unsupported wind-relieving pose), and ‘active stretching’ and ‘nerve tensioning’, which also serve to link postures together in a flowing sequence.

An old neck injury from childhood caused Simon to experiment with a series of nerve tensioning (nerve ‘stretching’) exercises for the neck and wrists to alleviate the discomfort he was experiencing. He found that many students similarly benefited from the movements and then realised that tensioning these same nerves also worked along the acupuncture meridians. These nerve ‘stretches’ are now part of a series of flowing arm movements that characterise the Synergy-style practice and teaching.

In a similar way, much of what Simon and Bianca teach has been gauged through observing their students and the way they approach their yoga practice. As Simon explains: “Watching the way other people work is invaluable, whether it be your teacher or your students. Everyone has different abilities and different

approaches, many of which have validity for more than just that individual.” Such abilities and approaches can also vary at any given time and Simon sees it as essential to give students a way to practise that caters for this. “By giving options for varying degrees of difficulty in the postures and cautioning students in how they approach the practice overall, we try to present yoga in a manner that teaches students to teach themselves about their own limits and capabilities. This is absolutely essential if you are to learn how to connect with your own inner teacher. In *The Heart of Yoga*, Desikachar advises that to develop a yoga practice you need to find a way to connect with this inner teacher. I believe that when you can connect with your inner teacher, this is the real yoga.”

Perhaps Simon’s most important contribution to the science of yoga is his work on *bandhas* (internal locks). Simon quotes BKS Iyengar who, in *Light on Yoga*, refers to “the three main bandhas: Jalandhara, Uddiyana and Mula.” Simon explains that the mention of three main bandhas indicates that there are, in fact, more than three bandhas throughout the body. Comparing the musculoskeletal anatomy and physiology of the three main bandhas, Simon now defines a generalised bandha as ‘the co-activation or simultaneous tensing of opposing muscles around a joint complex’. Jalandhara Bandha (Throat lock), for example, is formed around the cervical spine joint complex when the head is brought slightly forward, activating neck flexor muscles, and the neck is simultaneously brought slightly backwards, activating neck extensor muscles.

From this definition of a bandha, in addition to the asana instructions he had received from Mr Iyengar, Simon elucidated the bandhas for the other main joint complexes around the body, namely the hips (Kati Bandha), knees (Janu Bandha), ankles (Kulpha Bandha), shoulders (Amsa Bandha), elbows (Kurpara Bandha) and wrists (Mani Bandha). In their book *Applied Anatomy and Physiology of Hatha Yoga*, Simon and Bianca describe how these nine main

bandhas work throughout the body to not only stabilise joints but also to enhance and regulate the flow of energy and matter through the body’s four main circulatory channels (*nadis*). These channels are the cardio-vascular system, the lymphatic system, the nervous system and the acupuncture meridian system.

Simon furthermore describes how each bandha can be formed in two extreme ways: either to *increase* local heat and pressure and thereby restrict local circulation, or to *decrease* local heat and pressure and thereby enhance local circulation. Used correctly, these nine bandhas in their opposing forms of high and low pressure have the potential to regulate and control the movement of energy through the body. Simon also believes there is an important application of this technique in yoga therapy, where yogic techniques are used for the treatment of illnesses and injuries.

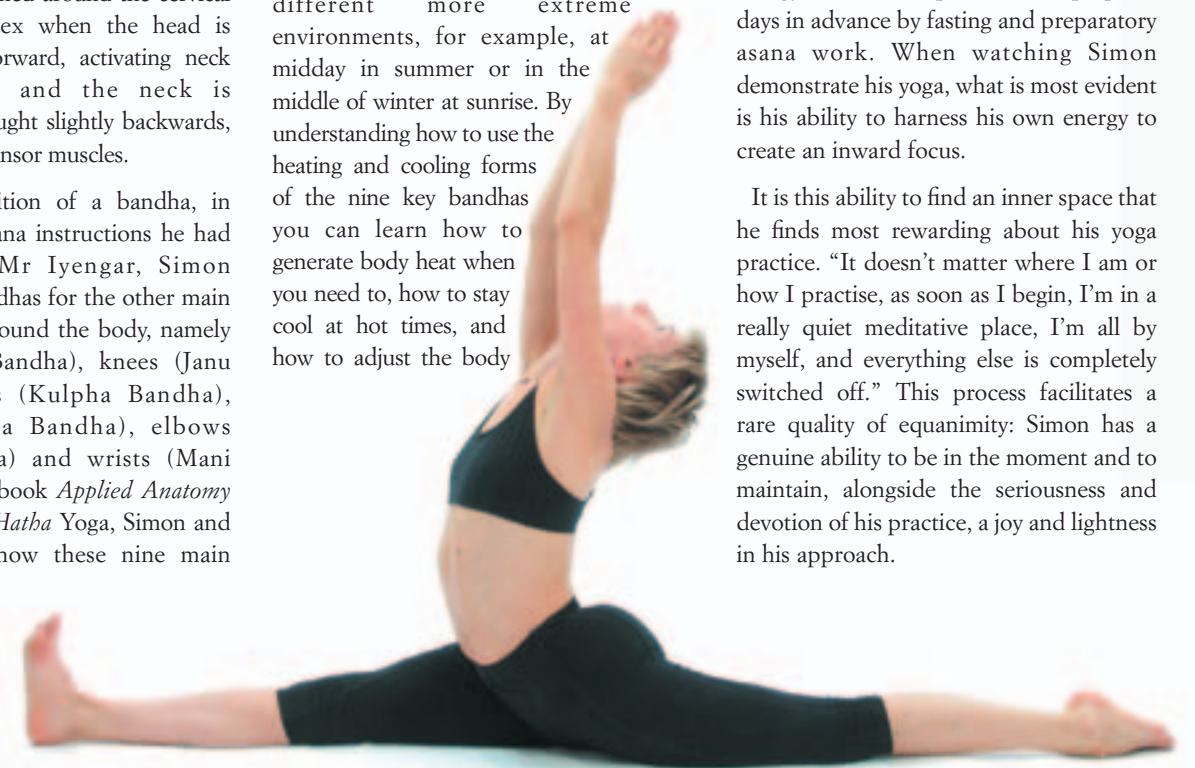
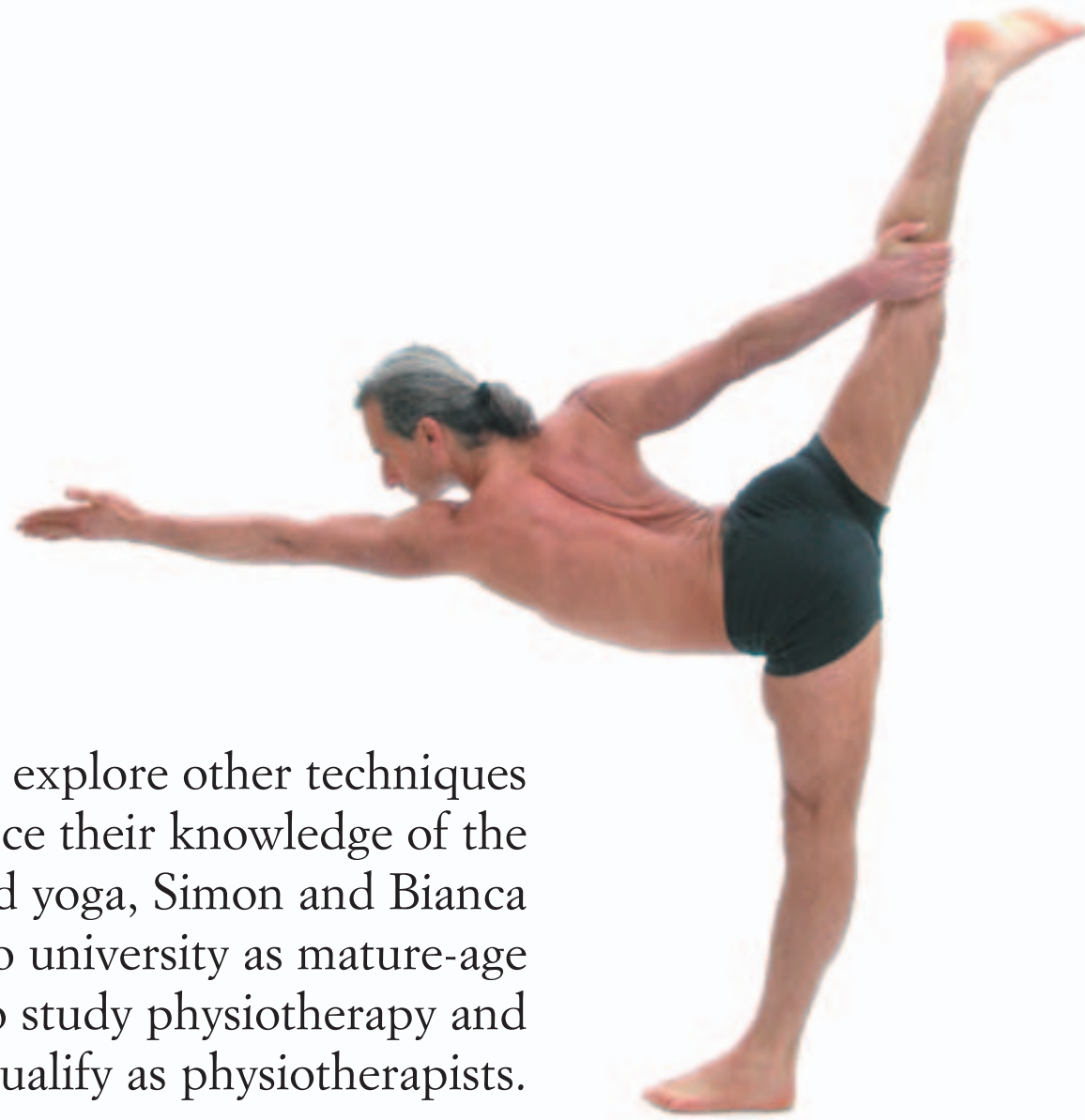
The principles of bandha can also be applied to regulate heat in the body and enable the yoga practitioner to work in different environments. Outdoor practice is an important part of Simon’s personal practice. “Altering your external environment is important in teaching you about adaptation,” he explains. “Although it is generally recommended that the beginner practise in a controlled indoor environment, it is useful to learn how to practice in different more extreme environments, for example, at midday in summer or in the middle of winter at sunrise. By understanding how to use the heating and cooling forms of the nine key bandhas you can learn how to generate body heat when you need to, how to stay cool at hot times, and how to adjust the body

and your practice according to the environment. This assists you in gathering energy rather than depleting it during your practice. If you limit yourself to an indoor place then you limit your skills of adaptation.” Simon sees adaptation as a key aspect in maintaining mental and physical flexibility in one’s practice: “There needs to be flexibility in how you practise at any given time, and also in where and when one practises. The principle of non-attachment (*aparigraha*) should extend not only to how you practise, but to the practice space itself.”

The flow and dynamism in Simon’s practice comes from the way he regulates the breath in combination with the use of these bandhas. Simon explains that “when the principles of internal pressure due to breathing and movement are understood and safely practised by an experienced practitioner, then the flow of *prana* (vital energy) through the body is greatly enhanced if the breath is carefully held in or out during each posture and also while moving from one posture to the next.” Simon says that this is a principle he initially learned from his Tibetan yoga teacher, but which he then applied by practising yoga under water.

Simon credits the control of his breath and energy in his practice as one of the main reasons for his reduced needs for sleep and food and for his abundant energy. For certain practices, he prepares days in advance by fasting and preparatory asana work. When watching Simon demonstrate his yoga, what is most evident is his ability to harness his own energy to create an inward focus.

It is this ability to find an inner space that he finds most rewarding about his yoga practice. “It doesn’t matter where I am or how I practise, as soon as I begin, I’m in a really quiet meditative place, I’m all by myself, and everything else is completely switched off.” This process facilitates a rare quality of equanimity: Simon has a genuine ability to be in the moment and to maintain, alongside the seriousness and devotion of his practice, a joy and lightness in his approach.



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This joy in practising yoga is always evident when Simon teaches and demonstrates, and is something he makes a point of passing on to his students. “It is important to make what you do in your practice and in your life enjoyable. This doesn’t mean being decadent, lazy or non-serious, but rather it’s a state of mind that you create no matter what the situation - the ability to generate an inner state of harmony and bliss.”

“Finding this joy in practice is about inwardly expressing thankfulness for your life, which brings about a love and appreciation of the people and things in your life. I see this as connected to *ishvara pranidhana* (devotion to the universal consciousness), and the ultimate realisation of yoga that the individual self and the universal self are one. I believe you

should make sure that about 20% of your practice focuses on things that will assist and strengthen your physical and mental development, but 80% of the time you should practise with enjoyment and love, thereby assisting in your spiritual development.”

Simon maintains a remarkable hatha yoga practice, and is devoted to his own personal and spiritual development through yoga. He balances commitment to his own journey and to his wife and baby daughter, with that of a genuine commitment to his students. From his ability to manage so many aspects of his life with such equanimity, radiant energy and devotion, Simon also demonstrates the benefits that may arise from the elements of ‘zeal in practice’, ‘self-study’ and ‘surrender to the universal consciousness’, Patanjali’s three ‘acts of yoga’.

**Further Reading:**

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Bianca Machliss and Simon Borg-Olivier, *Applied Anatomy and Physiology of Hatha Yoga*, Yoga Synergy, Sydney, 2005.

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