



Welcome ..

Thanks for coming to stay with us at Billabong Retreat. We are a small family run business and our vision is to create somewhere to connect with your own nature, the nature of others and the nature around you.

Thank you for taking a chance on us, for spending your hard earned money and valuable time at our humble abode. We aim to honour that trust you have placed in us by offering you a great value active wellness experience that hopefully benefits you and your life in some small way.

If there is anything that is not right then please do let us know. Our intentions are to deliver what we promise. If we know about something then we stand a chance of making it better for you. If we don't know then there is nothing we can do. Please do tell us about things that need fixing about your stay with us.

Enjoy, relax and thrive

Paul & Tory x

OUR VISION

To create a space for people to reconnect; to themselves, to others and to the nature around them.

OUR RESPONSIBILITIES

To the environment, our staff, our suppliers, our customers and the places we invest our money.

OUR VALUES

Honesty and kindness and acceptance for every person.

OUR OFFER

Nature, nutrition, community, yoga, meditation, mindfulness & kindness.



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Everything is available online and we will send you an email when you leave with details. You can also get copies from reception.



Information

Reception: 02 4573 6080 Emergency Contacts: 0432 340 702 / 402 505 272

Smoking

We are in a bush fire flame zone and it is a condition of our council approval that smoking is only allowed in the one area in the car park. This is strictly enforced for obvious safety reasons and guests smoking in other areas will be asked to leave.

Bush Fire Safety

In the event of an emergency please meet in the car park in front of reception. If evacuation is required you will be issued with directions to Maraylya town hall, the local RFS fire safety meeting point. Please sign in and out of the property via the form in front of reception –this way the authorities will know who is on site.

Duty Manager Contact

Reception is staffed between 8:30am and 5pm every day of the week to assist you. Outside of these hours, if the reception is closed then the Duty Manager can be contacted in the wellness centre or via the kitchen staff.

Mobile Phones

We try and encourage a digital detox whilst you are here and request that phones are not used in any public areas or lounges and are not brought into the yoga room.

WIFI

We don't offer WIFI on purpose because we believe we are all (including us) addicted to our devices and the need to be constantly checking for messages, notifications or likes to our recent post!

Check Out

Room check out is 9am on day of departure. A limited number of 11am room checkouts are available for a small cost on request to reception.

Hairdryers

These are available in Deluxe cabins or on loan from reception.

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Feedback / Improvements

Please let reception know if anything is not right and we will do our best to correct it. We email all guests an electronic feedback form after departure and value your opinion on how we can improve.

Power Cuts

In the event of a power-cut emergency lighting comes on in. Our staff will start our generator and your emergency lights will go off within 10-15 minutes.

Bikes

We have two bikes by the side of the cottage that you are free to borrow. Reception can advise on possible routes.

Bush walks

The best nature walks are around the billabong. Otherwise we have three national parks within a ten-minute drive, Mitchell Park, Scheyville Park and Cattai Lagoon. Reception has directions.

Shops

Nearest shops are Windsor that is a ten-minute drive. There is a large shopping complex at Rouse Hill fifteen minutes away.

Doctors & Pharmacy

There are many doctors within ten minutes away. One that permit drop in appointments is: Rouse Hill Medical Centre, Rouse Hill Town Centre, 10-14 Market Ln, Rouse Hill NSW 2155. (02) 8889 8900. Nearest pharmacy is Soul Pattinson Chemist - Rouse Hill, 8 Rouse Hill Shopping Road, Rouse Hill NSW 2155. (02) 9629 4079

Drinking Water

Water in the cabins is a mixture of pure rainwater combined with Sydney town-water top ups. The water in both the kitchen and bubbler by the noticeboard goes through sediment, carbon and UV filtration and is recommended for drinking. We do not serve water with meals as it hinders digestion and we not offer iced or cold water as it reduces hydration. Water should be drunk before yoga, not during yoga.

Yoga Room Special Requests

Please do not bring hot drinks, open cups or food into the yoga room.

Insects & Mossies

We are a native Australian bush retreat and that means insects. We advise you to keep your room fly-screens closed at all times, even during the day. This way you keep your bedroom mossie free! Try not to worry about spiders or snakes – they are mostly harmless.

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Spa Menu & Treatments

Please book at reception

Relaxation Massage - 55 mins - \$110

Relax as our therapists gently knead and stroke your muscles to create a feeling of wellbeing and relaxation. A relaxation massage is designed to ease tension, release stress, reduce aches and calm the sympathetic nervous system.

Hot Stone Massage - 55 mins - \$150

Stone therapy is a thermo-therapy, using heated basalt stones on key acupressure sites on the body to relax the muscles, allowing for a much deeper massage. Heated stones can also be placed on the body's chakras, or energy points, creating balance both physically and mentally.

Pregnancy Massage - 55 mins - \$110

Relaxation massage using our special pregnancy massage cushion.

Facial - 55 mins - \$120

A flower essence journey using Organic Spa products containing ingredients derived from native plants. Your mind and body will feel revived and your skin will regain its natural radiance. All facials include skin specific cleansers, activating exfoliators, herbal masks and moisture therapies to achieve optimum results.

Reiki Energy Healing - 55mins - \$110

Reiki is an energetic healing modality that treats the whole person's energy flow affecting body, emotions, mind and spirit. Beneficial effects include relaxation and feelings of peace, security and wellbeing. Reiki is a simple, natural and safe method of healing.

Naturopath (Fri only) - 55mins - \$150

Naturopathy is a holistic approach to wellness based on the principle that the body has the inherent ability to heal itself. Using the healing power of nature and gentle therapeutic techniques, the body, mind and emotions are supported during the healing process.

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Spa Menu & Treatments

Please book at reception

Kinesiology (Thu only) - 55mins - \$150

A holistic therapy that uses muscle testing to help identify food sensitivities, enhance learning, aid the healing of muscular injuries, deal with fears and phobias, reduce anxiety & depression and overcome past trauma. Consultations include discussions, muscle testing, acupuncture, nutritional support and meridian balancing.

Hypnotherapy (Thu only) - 55mins - \$150

Hypnotherapy is an effective tool for directly accessing the power of the subconscious mind which is responsible for our emotional & habitual patterns. It can help stop smoking, over eating, excess drinking or difficulties associated with anxiety, insomnia and thoughts of not being good enough. It is very gentle and relaxing.

Iridology & Iris Photography (Fri only) - 55mins - \$150

Iridology is the study of health through an examination of the iris, (coloured section of the eye) the sclera (white of the eye) and the pupil. In this appointment your iris will be explained and how this is impacting your health. Copies of your eye photos will be given and an option for a full iris report is available.

Neuro Emotional Technique (Fri only) - 55mins - \$150

Emotional Technique (NET) is a safe, effective and a natural way to resolve long-standing health problems that have an emotional component. While emotions are perfectly normal, they sometimes produce behaviours years later that are counterproductive to our health. We use NET to identify, and help you let go of “stuck” negatively charged emotions, so that you can enjoy better health and well-being.

Weight Management Program (Fri only) - 55mins - \$150

For many people fat loss is the first step towards a happier, healthier lifestyle. However, there is so much conflicting information about diets and weight loss, it's easy to become overwhelmed and confused. Discover how you can best achieve and maintain a healthy weight through addressing underlying causes.

Hopi Ear Candling (Fri only) - 55mins - \$150

Hopi ear candles have traditionally been used by Hopi Shamen healers. Ear candling is primarily used for cleaning the ears, and to promote a healthy in the ears, and sinus cavities. It is also a very gentle and relaxing technique. People are often amazed at what is extracted through this process

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Private Yoga & Meditation Consultations

Tailoring the yoga-meditation to your needs

For four thousand years yoga & meditation was taught one on one. A teacher would sit down with a student and work out exactly what the student's needs were and then design a yoga-meditation practice that matched the needs of the individual.

During a private yoga-meditation consultation our highly experienced yoga-meditation teachers will find out what you want to work on, whether it be a particular problem area of the body, mind or breath and then design and teach you a yoga-meditation routine that you can take away with you as a written up personal practice.

We recommend a private yoga-meditation consultation for anyone new to yoga, who has not had a personal practice, who is pregnant, has any injuries or mobility challenges or who experiences anxiety or depression – that's most of us then!

Private Yoga - 55mins - \$120 (\$150 for two persons)

During a private yoga lesson the teacher will identify your specific physical, mental and spiritual needs, and guide you through a customised yoga practice tailored to suit your needs. You can choose to work on specific alignment, explore new asana's or learn new breathing and meditation techniques.

Private Meditation - 55mins - \$120 (\$150 for two persons)

Learn a repertoire of simple techniques tailored to your needs that can be practised anywhere for effective training of the mind and emotional self-regulation. Techniques include breath awareness, body scans, mantras, moving meditations and the use of sound.

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Far Infrared Sauna - \$50 per session (max 2 persons)

Please book at reception

Infrared saunas are an effective tool for natural healing and prevention. Infrared light has the ability to penetrate human tissue which in turn produces a host of anti-aging health benefits making infrared saunas one of the best therapies for overall healthier living. If you want to get yourself back into balance, an infrared sauna may help you achieve your wellness goals.

Sessions include choice of listening to podcasts, relaxing music or watching inspirational DVD plus use of shower. Maximum total time is 55 mins.

Program Options

Cardio 45 Min Near, Mid And Far

Starts at a high intensity to increase heart rate and cardiac output then lowers to sustain heart rate level. Circulation increases to promote healthy blood pressure.

Detoxification 37 Min Mid And Far

Starts at a high intensity to increase the body's core temperature then reduces to a low, comfortable intensity level. IR combination improves vascular access flow to reach toxins at the cellular level.

Pain Relief 30 Min Near, Mid And Far

An IR blend provides natural pain relief by reducing inflammation and swelling while near IR LEDs penetrate the tissue to promote cellular repair at a medium, constant intensity level.

Relaxation 40 Min Near, Mid And Far

Far, mid and near infrared rays induce deep relaxation as they relieve muscle tension at a low, comfortable intensity promoting overall stress reduction with regular use.

Weight Loss 30 Min Mid And Far

Starts at a high intensity to stimulate the cardiovascular system then reduces to a medium level. As the body works to cool itself, there is an increase in heart rate, cardiac output and metabolic rate similar to exercise.

Anti-Aging 30 Min Near, Mid And Far

A low, constant intensity level penetrates tissue to help with various skin concerns. Near IR LEDs improve overall skin tone, elasticity and firmness promoting anti-aging benefits.

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Our Pillars of Health, Wellness, Longevity & Joy

Eat Well

Eat the right foods. Look after your gut biome. No processed foods – just eat real food and slowly so it can be digested properly. No antibiotics if at all possible. Lots of natural probiotics. Minimise or avoid alcohol and caffeine. Avoid anything with hormones, chemicals, pesticides or antibiotics in it (that is most things unfortunately!). Drink filtered water.

Manage Stress

Learn skilful management of your sympathetic stress response system. First, know when you are stressed. Become very sensitive to the physical, emotional and mental patterns of stress so you learn to 'catch yourself' being stressed earlier and earlier. Meditation and mindfulness gives you this connection. Secondly, have tools and techniques that diffuse the stress response – mindful breathing is a popular one.

Exercise & Move

Sitting down at a desk all day is the new smoking. Insist on a stand-up desk or get another job. Look for opportunities for incidental exercise. Walk up stairs whenever possible. Get regular low impact exercise – you can't beat walking and swimming. Prioritise and insist on exercise being part of your social life.

Practise Kindness

Be kind to yourself, to others and to the nature around you. Love.

Live in Coherence

Ensure your mind and heart are not in conflict. Do what feels right, follow your dreams & instincts, and take risks. Don't do things just for money. Make your life count – what can you contribute to making this world a kinder and more loving place. Start doing this right now.

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Food Philosophy

We believe that good nutrition is one of the foundations of good health and longevity and that it should not be complicated. We serve wholefoods, as nature produced them, free from artificial pesticides, chemicals and antibiotics.

We serve vegetarian food not because we want to promote vegetarianism but because we believe vegetables should make up the bulk of the volume of our diet – at least 70%. We want to inspire our guests that vegetable based meals can be delicious, varied and satisfying – we hope you agree. We source the bulk of our fruit and vegetables from a local farm Common 2 Us where we have a direct relationship with the owner and do our best to reduce the environmental footprint of the food.

For most people we believe that ancient grains in moderation, legumes and organic dairy products are fine but also know that many people have sensitivities to these products and thus should be avoided. Sugar takes many forms and whilst we don't have refined sugar on the menu we still include small amounts of natural sugars such as honey. In small amounts natural sugars are fine but they still have the same effect on our body so have to be limited.

We don't serve fruit juice as it has a very high concentration of sugars and is not good for you. A couple of pieces of fruit a day with all their natural fibres is fine but not more.

Looking after your gut bacteria is as important as eating the right foods. The scientific evidence is indicating that a well-balanced gut biome is essential to maintaining a strong and effective immune system, and a strong and effective immune system is critical for longevity. Even more than that, the gut, through the enteric nervous system has billions of neurons and sends more messages to the brain than the brain sends to the gut and also produces around 80% of the body's serotonin. It is now thought that gut health can play an important role in mental health.

To look after your gut health you need to avoid antibiotics unless you are in a life or death situation. Antibiotics destroy your gut biome and it can take years to recover. Instead focus on consuming lots of natural probiotics such as sauerkraut, Kefir and Kombucha – food that our recent ancestors knew was good for us!



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Kindness To Self

Compassion and kindness starts with the self. This is not narcissistic or self-centred but the best contribution you can make to the universe. When you love yourself you will project love to others. When you hate yourself this is what you will radiate.

Being kind to yourself is really about being gentle with how you move your body, being gentle with what you put in your body and perhaps most importantly, being gentle with your thoughts.

Kind in Movement. Gentle can still be strong, just not damaging. Tennis, rugby, running and contact sports are all out. Walking, swimming, yoga, Tai Chi are all OK. Think about how you sit and sleep and whether these are gentle to your body.

Kind in Body. Your are what you eat is a popular motto and it's certainly true that much of what we consume in the western world is highly damaging to us. Processed food is designed to make money by using the cheapest ingredients and having you come back for more due to its addictive ingredients like salt and sugar that you crave. The food companies care about delivering shareholder return, not customer wellness. You have to cut the crap out of your diet. Real wholefoods cooked with love and care or organic meat that has been treated well. Food as nature produced it. Nature knows best. Our digestive systems have been evolving for millions of years but our diet has massively changed just in the last fifty. The current epidemic of ill health has reasons..

Kind in Thought. 'I'm useless', 'stupid me', 'I can't cope', 'I'll never be able to do this', 'I'll never find someone who loves me'. These kinds of thoughts are more common than you think but can be very damaging when repeated over and over again. Thoughts ultimately create your reality, your personality and your life. Through mindfulness we learn to notice repetitive patterns of negative thought and 'nip them in the bud' through deliberately practising positive thoughts, even if they appear forced initially. This is about practising gratitude, setting positive intentions and getting support and guidance.

Where thoughts go energy flows. If you don't change direction you are likely to end up where you were heading!



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Kindness to Others

We can easily get irritated when other human beings don't act or behave in a way that we think they should. We have a wide variety of these human beings here at Billabong Retreat and it is quite an intimate environment – you dine together, share cabins and lounges together and do classes together. Here are our hints and tips to having the best possible time with these other human beings!

- ❖ Try and speak in mindful quiet tones in all communal areas so everyone can hear themselves speak.
- ❖ Avoid using your phone in public areas.
- ❖ When you talk to people ask them about their lives – what brings them joy and happiness.
- ❖ Remember that we can often learn the most from people that we might have initially tagged as annoying!
- ❖ Respect that other people are entitled to have different views and perspectives to you and that is OK.
- ❖ Smile at everyone including the staff!
- ❖ Other people cannot make you angry or upset or irritated – you can only do that to yourself because of how you have reacted. You are the only one that can control your one hundred billion neurons. Even when other people exhibit stress or anger try and practice compassion and kindness – avoid feeding stress and anger with more stress and anger – as Gandhi said “ an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind”
- ❖ If a fellow guest's phone does go off in the yoga room then see it as an opportunity for training yourself to deal with possible irritations – the world is full of them. Being able to be OK with irritations is a very valuable skill – the most experienced meditators can stay cool, calm and collected whatever the environment and however many beeps and noises are going off – anyone can be cool, calm and collected in a cave!
- ❖ Judge someone by their intentions not by their actions or words. We all sometimes do something or say something that upsets someone that we did not intend to. Sorry is a great word that should be used wherever required.

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Our Story

Becoming a yoga teacher was as far from my life agenda as is possible. Running a yoga retreat would have been seen as sheer lunacy but after a failed business and loss of most of my money I found myself on a beach in Thailand, living close to a health and wellness resort, The Spa Samui. Here I spent time talking to people from all over the world about health, wellness and the meaning of life. I learnt that yoga was not really about the body, that we become what we eat and that our reality is a really a reflection of our life's thoughts and beliefs.

On returning to Australia I spotted a woman with orange hair and matching orange shorts at yoga, swapped wheatgrass shots with her, started dating and she fell pregnant with twins. This helped us focus. I also started doing my Advanced Yoga Teaching training qualification over two-years.

I was dabbling in the festival business with an eco-event Earth Festival in Centennial Park but it did not make us a living. Then my mum becomes a chronic alcoholic and even though I tried my hardest to save her life I was unable to do so. My mum was a beautiful loving caring person but never managed to find purpose or meaning that made her life worthwhile. When she died I committed to using my inheritance to do something worthwhile. To help people find connection, contentedness and peace of mind. The retreats that I saw in Thailand inspired me.

When I first saw this land in Maraylya I knew it was too special to keep to ourselves. I had never heard of Maraylya of course and hardly left the Eastern suburbs! The original house (now The Lodge) was already built so we moved from our tiny unit in Bondi with our newly born twin sons Oscar and Archie and started dreaming.

Getting permission to build a yoga retreat on this land is possibly the hardest thing I have ever done and the local council and our lack of significant funds did not make it any easier. Quotes from builders made that option impossible. Owner building a shed seemed like the only viable option. Then I saw some pictures of yurts on the Internet and thought surely it can't be that hard to build. I was wrong. I went three times over my original budget and it took nearly a year but I learnt a lot about building. We then built three small cabins (now rooms 5/6, 8 and 9) and decided to see if anyone wanted to come.

It was slow at first and we started with just Tory and I running a retreat every few weeks with me teaching all the yoga in what is now the lounge room and Tory doing all the cooking. We alternated looking after the kids with looking after our guests and then our

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third child Jade come along. Jade pretty much spent her first two years of life in the Billabong kitchen.

I loved teaching yoga and I learnt that one of the best things about teaching is it helps keep you as the teacher on the straight and narrow. It is like holding a mirror up to yourself and unless you want to be a liar, it helps you practice what you teach!

Slowly it grew. Guests seemed to like the experience of food, nature and yoga. We added one staff member and then another before, to our amazement, winning two gold awards at the NSW Tourism Awards for Most Unique Accommodation and Best Health & Wellness Retreat. This really motivated us and we applied and then won a federal government grant for innovative tourist facilities. With this as our catalyst we decided to expand and go through the painful and drawn out process of another Development Application for the pool, wellness centre and deluxe cabins. At multiple points we were told by council that it was impossible, that it would never get approved but I can be quite a determined and pushy young man, especially when I have a grant from the federal government behind me! We got approval, and with some serious 'owner builder planning' plus firm but fair tradesperson management I scheduled to close for only eight weeks in the winter of 2014 to build the rest of the retreat.

It was the hardest eight weeks of my life and not great for my mental or physical health. The place turned into a bombsite but we had to be ready to open in September as we had bookings. Not opening was not an option. Money was also running out and by the last week of the build we had \$1,000 left in the bank – not a great situation to be in when staff payday was only a few days away. It was really touch and go and I borrowed whatever money I could to see us through.

I couldn't take any chances with the relaunch so I went big with a half price offer and the phones went crazy. It was really challenging managing the demand with what was a much smaller staff back then – just ask Basia or Sarah what it was like – we almost burnt them out!

We have thankfully settled down in to a nice rhythm since then and hopefully have reduced all evidence of the previous building site that this place was. Our focus is on yoga, meditation, mindfulness combined with great wholefoods and a stunning nature centre. We aim to take care of our staff, of ourselves, of the nature around us and of the lovely guests that come and visit. I truly believe that we attract the best guests in the world – there are so many caring, lovely heart centred people in the world and we are very lucky to meet so many of them.

Thanks for reading

Paul x

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The Buildings

By Paul von Bergen

Building is inherently un-eco friendly in the modern world. It takes resources embodied with lots of energy, materials both natural and man-made and trucks and packaging to get those materials to you. Building Billabong Retreat was a long way from being eco-perfect. But, we tried.

I tried by asking lots of questions. Which materials have the most embodied energy? What choice do I have over choice of materials? Do I have to buy new? What does the building code allow for? What does my budget allow for?

It is not easy and certainly not black or white. Materials like concrete, are huge causes of carbon emissions but also last a long time and can be great at retaining heat. Materials like wood have reduced carbon footprint and can be sustainable but they don't last as long. The most sustainable timber is plantation pine but that isn't durable unless it is treated and many of those treatments are toxic! Hardwood lasts longer but is very expensive unless it is illegal forested from native habitat in Sumatra or old growth rainforests in Tasmania. Just asking at a timber yard where the wood comes from brings incredulous blank looks. We consume so much with no regard or understanding of that item's origin. I could not do that.

In the end we used mostly plantation pine with a light organic solvent preservative for the frames and structure, recycled hardwood telegraph poles for feature areas such as the yoga room doors, bamboo floor in the yoga room and mixed hardwood off cuts for the floors in the lounge and dining rooms and second hand doors, windows and furniture where possible. We did our best. It was not perfect. With unlimited budget or time we could have done better. We ended up with things going to landfill but we did not hide from this. I personally did most of the tip runs myself.

Building code is not really eco-friendly. Sure there is a section regarding the insulation and heating qualities but no consideration for the eco friendliness of the materials themselves. Hopefully that will change.

In the meantime I hope you enjoy what I have built. You can view the pictures and plans of the building in the book in the library. I am quite chuffed with the results – for a first attempt anyway!

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billabong RETREAT



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What Is Yoga?

By Paul von Bergen

Yoga is an ancient guide to bringing joy and contentment to human beings.

It originates from the Vedas, one of the earliest sources of human wisdom that is over four thousand years old and was chanted from generation to generation before the written word was even invented. The Vedas (which means knowledge) developed in the Himalaya during early human civilisation and inspired the Upanishads that were written a few thousand years later. Yoga is one of the seven major philosophical frameworks that emerged from the Upanishads.

One of the earliest writings of Yoga are the Yoga Sutras, one hundred and ninety six phrases defining yoga that were compiled by a sage called Patanjali around 300bc. Out of the approximately four thousand words in the Yoga sutras the word for yoga postures, asana, is only mentioned twice. Yoga is really all about the mind.

The very first word of the very first yoga sutra is 'Atha'. This word means pay attention – to the teachings, to other people but most importantly to yourself.

During the past fifty years yoga has come to the west and many people believe it is just a form of physical stretching done in gyms. Yoga is so much more than that. It is thousand year old wisdom that understands the nuances and peculiarities of the human condition that we all can suffer from and provides simple tools to overcome suffering. Its wisdom is even more relevant now than ever before.

The yoga postures (asana) should really be viewed as the entry-level meditation. Focusing the mind on the movement of the body is one of the easiest ways for modern busy minds to practice cultivating calmness and training attention inwardly. Plus it has the added bonus on maintaining strength and flexibility, externally and internally to modern humans with office jobs and sedentary lives.

The yoga should always adapt itself to suit the individual. For thousands of years yoga was taught from teacher to student with the teacher designing an appropriate yoga practice from a wide repertoire of yogic tools that ideally suited the individuals needs. The customised practice then needs to be practised regularly – this is how transformation occurs through appropriate and regular practice.

We offer private yoga and meditation consultations every day with our experienced teachers who will design a bespoke practice for your particular needs.

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Love Your Breath

By Paul von Bergen

Your breath is amazing. It is your connection to the present moment and the very thing that brings you life. It starts the moment you are born and finishes the moment you die. It frames your life.

It is full of expression and can be a very accurate indicator of the state of your mind. Short sharp low quality breathing patterns often indicate anxiety, stress and dis-ease. Slow steady calm breathing indicates confidence and a level of ease.

The breath is unique in that it links the conscious mind to the unconscious mind. Think about this for a moment. You go through life, doing the things you do, walking, shopping, working, driving, relaxing; mostly completely unconscious of your breathing – your autonomic subconscious nervous system seems to take care of it quite nicely. But, if you so decide you can consciously control and regulate your breath however you want. You can choose when to breath in and out, whether to pause, extend or shorten, to use the nostrils or mouth. You can choose to chest or belly breathe. Yet if you become distracted because say a friend starts talking to you then luckily, as you might have noticed, your subconscious nervous system takes over and controls the breathing – otherwise you would be dead.

This ability to be both consciously controlled and unconsciously controlled is unique to the respiratory system. Don't believe me? Then try this. See if you can consciously control say your cardio-vascular system; can you stop your aortic valve beating? What about your digestive system? Can you consciously release pancreatic juice from your pancreas or perhaps your endocrine system? Can you consciously release cortisol from your adrenal glands? No? OK then point proved, the respiratory system is very special – it bridges the divide between conscious and unconscious –wow.

When we cultivate a smooth and steady breathing pattern we are not just benefiting the respiratory system but are actually self-regulating the whole of the mind-body. A calm breath sends a signal to the subconscious autonomic nervous system that everything is OK, the sabre tooth tiger has gone, and it is time to activate the parasympathetic system when our immune and digestive systems are fully activated.

Breathing is precious; treat it with respect and love. Explore it. Understand it. Play with it. Peel back its layers. Watch it. Feel it. Love it.

Every-breath you take. Every-move you make.

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What is Meditation?

By Paul von Bergen

Meditation is really just a part of yoga. In the yoga sutras eight aspects or 'limbs' of yoga are described and include paying attention to a particular object or technique (dharana) and maintaining that concentration (dhyanam).

Meditation can be thought of as training for the brain and the nervous system. It is about deliberately using the brain in a particular way that encourages it to pay attention and be gentle on itself. Scientifically, meditation grows new tissues in the brain including the frontal cerebral cortex, the executive control part of the brain responsible for paying attention, emotional regulation and sensory management.

Meditation can take many forms – it's not what you do but how you do it. Washing the dishes can be a mindful meditation if done with the right focus and intention.

It is important to remember that meditation is not about stopping the thoughts coming into the mind – this is impossible and if you try and do this you might send yourself mad. Thoughts are like feelings and sensations, they are things that arise within your consciousness, they come and go, arise and pass.

What is most important is the quality of your commitment to meditate. Before starting set an intention that each time your mind wanders (as it invariable will) as soon as you notice it has wandered then bring yourself back to attention on your chosen meditation technique. It does not matter how many times your mind wanders, it does not make you a good meditator or a bad meditator in fact please throw any notion of being good or bad at meditating out of the window!

Another vital quality of meditation is self-compassion. When your mind seems determined to shoot in different directions every two and a half nano seconds it is important to be gentle on yourself each time you have to bring yourself back to attention. Perhaps even have a silent giggle about your cheeky monkey mind and how it loves to dance. Notice any self critical thoughts such as 'what is wrong with me', 'I bet everyone else does not have such a busy mind'. These kind of thoughts only come about when you have expectations about the kind of experience meditation should bring. Instead just focus on your chosen meditation technique and each time you notice your mind has wandered, gently bring it back to attention. This constant 'bringing back to attention', especially when done with self-kindness is the activity that changes the brain, grows new tissue and allows us to see clearly without getting bogged down in negative thought patterns.

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Types of Meditation?

By Paul von Bergen

Almost anything can be meditation if done with the correct focus and intention. You are only limited by your imagination!

Moving Meditation

This is where the object of attention is the physical body and you direct all of your attention on the sensations of movement and your ability to refine the movement with increasing subtlety and precision. Sometimes known as yoga. This practice can be done by anyone who can move their little finger and is great for those with busy minds who find seated meditations challenging.

Breathing Meditation

One of the most powerful types of meditation due to the unique nature of the breath and its infinite possibilities.

Mantra Meditation

This involves repeating words silently in your head, particularly ones that might have significance or benefit to you. It could be a phrase in English linked to a quality you want to cultivate, perhaps 'I love myself' repeated over and over again silently in your head.

Chanting Meditation

As above but with words or phrases chanted out loud which has the added bonus of creating vibrations within your body, particularly when using special sounds contained within Vedic & Sanskrit words.

Colouring In / Mandala Meditation

As available at Billabong Retreat, the focus of your attention is not the end result, but the process of moving the pencil and filling the spaces. After spending hours doing a mandala we recommend throwing it away.

Walking Meditation

Similar to moving meditation and can be done anywhere but beware, it makes you look silly. Simply pay attention to every component of your movement, as you raise the leg think "I am raising my leg" and as the foot touches the ground pay attention to exactly how it touches the ground and what sensations you can notice. Pay attention to your hips and your balance, how does it fluctuate. This technique can make you walk very slow so don't try it at Central Station at 5pm!

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What is Mindfulness?

By Paul von Bergen

Mindfulness is quite simply the biggest revolution in health and wellness but not because it is new, it is not. The concepts and ideas of mindfulness have been around for thousands of years. It is because the concept of mindfulness has captured the imagination of millions of people around the world and because there is solid evidence based scientific research to back it up.

Mindfulness is just a word that gives definition to the concept that we are the directors of our consciousness and our lives. Our actions and intentions make a massive difference to our health and happiness. We create our own reality. Our patterns of awareness and habits change our brain and nervous system. Really how could it not!

If I told you that by going down the gym every day for thirty minutes and doing bicep curls your biceps would get bigger you would not be surprised. But many people are still surprised to learn that if they 'exercise' a particular region of their brain then that part of their brain gets bigger. Obvious really.

Mindfulness is about paying attention. Training yourself to be able to notice your thoughts, emotions and physical sensations as they are happening and discriminate between them, not take them too personally.

Mindfulness is about realising that thinking is not the only form of human awareness and that with practice we can direct our consciousness to many different things.

Mindfulness is about connecting with our heartfelt desires, our true values and wishes for life. It is about making sure we prioritise on what is most important, listening to our heart as well as our mind.

Mindfulness is about setting our direction in life and ensuring that our actions, wherever possible are in line with the direction we want to go.

Mindfulness is the meeting of science and spirituality, quantum mechanics and cosmology. Mindfulness is art of inhabiting your body and mind.

Mindfulness is the art of living.

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What is Stress?

By Paul von Bergen

If stress was just a thought that went around your brain it wouldn't be too much of a problem but it is much more than that.

Stress, or put more accurately, the triggering of the sympathetic stress response system, is a whole of body physiological response designed to save lives. It has been evolving since the first single cell life forms.

This self-preservation system has been probably the most powerful behavioural instincts for all life forms for a billion years of evolutionary history. It is what makes lizards freeze or run away. It is what makes animals attack or defend themselves. It is what saved early humans from sabre tooth tigers. It is what we trigger now because the kids have made a mess or we don't think we can cope with our workload. We trigger it now by thought alone.

When the sympathetic stress response is triggered the body releases a whole range of hormones including cortisol that prepares the body to fight, flight or freeze. The blood pressures and heart rate rise and blood is diverted to the large limbs (for the fighting or flighting). The immune system and digestive systems are degraded. There is no point fighting an internal bacterial threat if you are just about to be someone else's dinner – heck give them the dodgy bacteria as a final parting gesture as they gobble you up! It is not a brilliant system for dealing with the pressures of modern life.

This system is triggered by the amygdala, two small almond shaped crescents at the top of the brain stem and part of the most primitive and ancient brain. The amygdala is like a twitchy sentry guard. Always on the look out for existential threats (whether real or imaginary) and being very quick to trigger the stress response, just in case.

We all have these hairline trigger stress responses and the problem is that modern life is triggering them all the time. It has been estimated that eight five percent of visits to GP's are stress related and disease such as cancer, auto-immune disease and cardio-vascular disease all have origins in stress.

You need to become super-sensitive to stress as apposed to numb yourself to it. If you are oblivious to it then the damage is still being done, you just don't realise it. By training yourself to notice when your system has triggered this response you can do something about it. Create a different response. Self regulate. Self control.

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