

# Teaching Yoga in Australia is Different

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Yoga Australia is a peak body, considering the wider picture of yoga practice across Australia and how this industry of ours fits into social agendas, legislation and current trends. In this capacity YA exists to have a positive influence on yoga practice throughout the country, to make it more widespread, accessible, safer and lastly but perhaps most importantly, RELEVANT.

An all encompassing question that Yoga Australia is addressing at the present moment is "What does it look like to be a yoga teacher in **Australia** in 2018?"

This is a very different question to "What does it look like to be a yoga teacher in 2018?" The difference is we are practicing and teaching in Australia.

If we accept Krishnamacharya's assertion that yoga is an evolutionary discipline, evolving to suit the time and place then it is essential that we discuss as a community what yoga is right here and now in Australia.

**"Yoga is the least systematic of exercises. If one practices postures without addressing needs, no routine is established, because needs change from day to day. One should act on the present and the future and not worry too much about the past."**

– From interviews with T Krishnamacharya by Sarah Dars, published in Viniyoga Review no 24, December 1989

We have particular needs in this country that must be addressed if we are to move into the future strongly and clearly! Those needs turn up embodied by our students; be they a misunderstanding of nutrition, a recovery from abuse, addiction, a lack of purpose leading to depression or any number of health challenges. As yoga teachers, our capacity to assist our students to lift them out of their pain and suffering is primarily what fuels us.

## So how do we best engage all Australians in yoga in 2018 in Australia, right here and now?

The answer has to be that we prepare new yoga teachers to work effectively and to focus their attention in a way that is not only individually therapeutic but that contributes to the bigger picture of public health.

Yoga Australia, in response to fantastic interest by its members and non-members to social media posts in **NAIDOC Week**, which celebrates our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories and cultures, has, this year, decided to invest in creating a **Reconciliation Action Plan** following the guidelines of **Reconciliation Australia**. This will be very much a two way exchange and with appropriate care will serve to re-establish the correct level of respect for Elders and communities holding knowledge that can truly serve us all here in Australia.

Currently there are over **1000 organisations** in a variety of sectors including peak organisations such as ours that have completed a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), which is a structured and mentored approach to advance reconciliation in this country.

The RAP requires real commitment and here are 4 different types of RAP's available.

**Reflect ( 1 year)**  
**Innovate (2 years)**  
**Stretch (3 years)**  
**Elevate (3 years)**

On September 17th Yoga Australia will commence drafting the Reflect RAP which Reconciliation Australia describes here:

A Reflect RAP clearly sets out the steps you should take to prepare your organisation for reconciliation initiatives in successive RAPs. Committing to a Reflect RAP allows your organisation to spend time scoping and developing relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, deciding on your vision for reconciliation and exploring your sphere of influence, before committing to specific actions or initiatives. This process will help to produce future RAPs that are meaningful, mutually beneficial and sustainable.

To quote Angie Abdalla, the CEO of Old Ways New an organisation that uses traditional methodology to work towards contemporary goals: "One thing is clear: Australia is missing out on our home grown knowledge potential and thought leaders should be looking closer to home for the ideas and wisdom that will inform the next wave of policy thinking and ingenuity."

This is true in many fields of endeavour and perhaps even more true in yoga.

Over the period of the Reconciliation Action Plan implementation, there will be much discussion of ways that yoga in this country might be informed by traditional knowledge in this country of mindfulness, connection, physical movement, nutrition, ascetic and cleansing practices, respect, ceremony, chanting etc. At the core of this possibility are individual relationships.

In many ways the gift of being taught anything about culture in this country is much like the traditional ways of being taught yoga in India ... based on merit and patience. With over 60 different yoga lineages in this country and 250 plus Aboriginal nations, there is plenty of room for different outcomes!

Each clan, living in a specific area for which they have custodianship, has different languages, practices and stories. Some use a smoking ceremony, water ceremony or sweeping. Imagine yoga teachers across this country connecting with their local culture, knowing where they are and those people that came before them. Perhaps it is important to ponder on who we are and where we came from and connect with our own ancient cultures so the communication can be more potent and heartfelt.

Reconciliation is of course a two way exchange. One initiative that Yoga Australia wishes to explore is the provision of bursary positions for people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities by yoga studios. Initially the bursaries might be offered to their yoga students and hopefully also in time to yoga teacher trainees. This takes much thought and preparation and needs to be in the first instance a conversation in which as many of us as possible are involved.

Over the last years several bursary positions have been created by generous yoga studios and lessons have been learnt. Yoga Australia is currently engaging in discussion with yoga teachers who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, yoga teachers who have worked in Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities themselves throughout the country. Please chime in with your own experiences or questions as we grow a body of ideas and knowledge to pass on.

Being culturally appropriate can be a 'minefield' experience for many people in this truly multicultural country. This is not just relevant when talking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but rather all the cultures that Australia hosts currently. It might be a challenge but as they say, nothing ventured nothing gained. And there is much to be gained! **How do you make sure your yoga class or yoga teacher training is culturally sensitive?**

With the biggest influx of migrants in Australia being from India it makes sense to think about whether your class is culturally appropriate. Ensuring what you are providing appeals to the 75% of Australians who identify firstly with a culture other than Australian, will grow class numbers and provide a way to develop your teaching.

3% of Australians identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There are many pathways of discovery that will help you open the door of your studio a little wider and make it more comfortable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to join a class.

## Here are a few.



Open each of your yoga classes with an **Acknowledgement of Country**. The words you express, as with all yoga, need to come from the heart but here are some you could build on:

"I acknowledge Aboriginal peoples as the First Peoples of this nation and respectfully acknowledge the (insert local Custodians) peoples of the land on which we meet today. I pay tribute to Elders past, present and emerging and hope that in some small way my teachings support their custodianship of this land. It is a great privilege to be teaching on Country"

Acknowledging before class is a beautiful way to connect, to help your students be present, to take their mind into the moment, the place and the reverence that will support their practice. Many of us have been subjected to a rattled-off Acknowledgement of Country that is clearly nothing more than a box tick. This is not what we are talking about.

If at any stage you feel that your words are perfunctory and purely out of habit STOP ...think again about new wording, seek out Elders within our community who might help you craft your words, connect to Country by reading the history of the Country on which you are teaching etc. Make it clear to yourself and your students your personal reason for Acknowledging Country and encourage discussion. This is very important.

Consider having your local Elders provide a **Welcome to Country** for big events like starting your Teacher Training for the year, opening a new studio, celebrating a milestone or NAIDOC Week etc. Most areas have an Aboriginal Cultural Centre and this is a good place to start if you don't have an existing relationship to draw on. Welcome to Country attracts a fee so don't forget to ask and make sure it is within your budget.

Look into taking a **Cultural Competency course**. If you are in the Sydney region this is a great one run by Sydney University or this one run by the Centre for Cultural Competence Australia is comprehensive, relevant nationwide. Setting this up as something your students and you all do together will widen the impact. There might even be a course you can investigate in the Country you are teaching in.

If appropriate, consider opening up a couple of **bursary positions** for a year's worth of yoga at our studio for members of your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to attend... or go for gold if you are offering Teacher Training and capable of opening up a bursary position.

Relationship is all about listening, so approaching reconciliation respectfully with ears open to all that can be learnt along the way will be a rich and rewarding journey.

If Reconciliation is something that you or your studio might like to be engaged with please send an email to [kate@yogaaustraliaorg.au](mailto:kate@yogaaustraliaorg.au) and we will keep you posted and offer opportunities to engage.