



by Suzanne Eggins

# Strength & Courage

How yoga is an anchor of peace against life's harshest blows

Sydney's eastern suburbs are synonymous with privilege, boasting the highest annual incomes and the highest water usage in Australia. But human suffering does not respect postcodes, and there are some blows that affluence cannot soften. Yet, faced with more than anyone's fair share of suffering, Vaucluse resident Di Taylor has found that yoga practice gives her the strength and courage to go forward.

I meet Di, now in her 50s, when I treat myself to a day-time yoga class. As Di and I assist each other in supported *Setu Bandha* (Bridge pose), we chat about having both studied languages at Sydney University. Di tells me she taught Italian at Saturday

School for many years. I mention that I teach at the University of New South Wales.

"My son was at your university," she responds, conversationally. "He was killed back in July. In New Zealand. You may have seen it on the news. Three architecture students from the University of New South Wales."

Her admission stuns me. I do remember the event – it was front-page news in the national and local media. The three fourth year students were on a skiing holiday with one of the girl's families in New Zealand's South Island when their four-wheel drive vehicle slid off an icy road and plummeted 250 metres down a cliff. Three young lives poised to realise their adult potential wiped out in a few seconds. Three families cast into the blackness of grief. And Di was one of them.

I stare at her, disbelieving. She lost her son only five months ago and she's here at yoga? Why isn't she weeping alone in a dark room? Tearing her hair out in misery and resentment at the cruelty of fate? Giving in to the despair and self-pity that I'm sure would paralyse me forever?

"How are you coping?" I ask in amazement.

"Okay." Di smiles. "Thank goodness for yoga."

Awed by her composure, I arrange to interview Di at her home. In the living room every flat surface is crowded with soft toys – cuddly elephants, floppy puppies, cheeky multicoloured birds. Posters of Disney characters are sticky-taped to walls. A two-metre Christmas tree blooms with decorations. There are calendars everywhere – on the fridge, the bench top, and on a large white noticeboard, where the heading "my day" stands over small named snapshots of smiling adults. On the kitchen table, puzzles and plastic toys lie beside pages of maths questions in large print: "10 + 6 = ?" A little surprised, I assume Di has a younger child.

"My younger son James is severely autistic," Di tells me. "He's now 21." I begin to realise that Di's older son's death is not the only challenge life has thrown her way.

Di first took up yoga 15 years ago. To understand why, we jump back 20 years. Di tells me how James's early diagnosis with Kammer's autism was straightforward because he exhibits the classic features,

such as difficulty with verbal language and an avoidance of eye contact. He likes structure and repetition and becomes highly anxious if there are any changes around him. He is a visual learner – what he can't see, he doesn't understand.

Di's explanation is so articulate and matter-of-fact that only gradually do I glimpse the impact of James's autism on her life. She mentions in passing that because of James's anxiety about new places, she and her husband have not holidayed together since James was about eight. James will never be able to live independently because, as well as his autism, he has medical conditions.

Both James and his older brother, Andrew, inherited Gittleman's Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder where the tubules in the kidneys don't retain the essential salts that are usually re-circulated back into the blood system. Both boys had to be constantly eating and drinking to avoid dehydration. On top of that, both suffered severe and unusual allergies, so all the food they ate had to come from Di's kitchen.

Di describes the horrifying stress of the early years, before the boys were correctly diagnosed.

"They both were very ill for years," Di says. "It wasn't till Andrew was diagnosed just before five and a half that we realised they had this Gittleman's Syndrome as well and that was why they could never get well. It affected their immune system. They used to go into potassium coma where they'd literally start to fade out."

With Andrew correctly diagnosed, and James old enough to attend the Autism Association five days a week, Di at last had some day-time hours to herself. A friend suggested she try yoga.

Di remembers vividly her first class in Bondi 15 years ago: "As soon as I started doing the poses I knew that this was something that resonated with me."

But yoga had one completely unexpected effect. When Di lay down for the relaxation segment of the class, tears began to pour down her cheeks.

"It wasn't that I felt sad," she explains. "It was just simply a release after all the build-up of tension over all the years of looking after the children, which was really a day-to-day, moment-to-moment thing. There

was never a week that went by that we weren't at the doctors or at the hospital."

Di's tearful release during *Shavasana* continued for six months, twice a week. Then, as mysteriously as they'd started, the tears stopped.

After about four years, Di began attending the BKS Iyengar Yoga Institute of Bondi Junction three times a week, a routine she's kept to whenever she could for the past 11 years. But interruptions have been forced upon her.

In March 2000, Di was diagnosed with bowel cancer and underwent emergency surgery, six months of debilitating

involved having Teflon tape attached all the way up the front of her! As a result, she felt very vulnerable around her scar line, but she was determined to return to yoga. For the first time she realised the truth of her teacher's repeated observation: you can always use other parts of your body that aren't affected by surgery or injury. So Di made sure she worked her limbs, keeping them strong and flexible, while taking care not to overwork her scar area.

Although her scar remained very tender, and she did modified versions of some asanas, like backbends, by the end of 2003, she felt health and strength returning.

"I'm not a religious person," she says. "But from a spiritual point of view I do feel that there's something intangible that happens during the practise of yoga. It's not something that I can rationalise or would want to rationalise, but I feel that I go out a different person than the person who went in. And if that's spirituality, then for me that's what it is."

chemotherapy, and a second operation. The worst part, Di says, is that she was unable to practise yoga during the chemotherapy. Her characteristically positive approach to life stood her in good stead at this time.

"I just simply went, 'Well, all I can do is put one foot in front of the other here. I don't know where we're going but I know I'm going to get through this. That's it.' So that's what I did."

As soon as the chemotherapy was completed, Di returned to yoga class, where her teacher, Kay Parry, carefully eased her back into the postures.

But in mid-2001, she was rushed to hospital with an incisional hernia all the way down the scar line, a result of the chemotherapy. A month later Di had the operation to correct the hernia, which

But the stressors and pain in Di's life just kept on coming. Early in 2004 the Autism Association dropped some of James's support, putting his safety at risk.

"I had nights where I was so anxious that I didn't sleep," Di recalls of this worrying time. At class, her teacher would put her into rejuvenating poses such as *Halasana* (Plough pose) and the supported shoulder stand.

After a four-month battle with the Autism Association and the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Di succeeded in having James's support reinstated.

But then in July 2004 tragedy struck in its harshest form. Di's older son Andrew, then 23, travelled to New Zealand with his girlfriend Anna and fellow student Lisa (also from Vaucluse) during the mid-year

university break. They planned to go skiing near Wanaka where Lisa's parents lived.

"Andrew was mad keen to go – had never seen snow, had never been skiing," Di says. "He was a fairly cautious type of young man. He'd even gone to the trouble of having skiing lessons."

They were driving back from the Treble Cone ski fields on Friday July 16th when their four-wheel drive careered over the cliff edge. The girls were killed instantly. A passing doctor scrambled down and revived Andrew, who was evacuated to Dunedin hospital in a critical condition.

"We were rung at about 7.30 that evening," Di tells me. "At that stage it was too late for my husband to get on the plane. So we had to wait through the night."

Di doesn't elaborate, but I can only imagine how terrible that night must have been. Her husband flew to Dunedin next day, but tests showed that Andrew had no brain activity. He rang Di from Dunedin and together they had to make the decision to switch off the life support.

"I had to stay here. I had to look after James," Di tells me, then adds, without self-pity but with an understandable trace of regret: "So I didn't get to see Andrew before he died."

In the midst of their own grief, Di and her husband faced the difficulty of explaining to James what had happened to his brother. James could not comprehend verbal statements so they had to walk James through Andrew's funeral visually. They took James with them to the airport cargo terminal, where he saw Andrew's casket, and they rode back in the hearse. A couple of days later they took James for a viewing of Andrew's body.

"He got a shock," Di says. He went and sat down in an alcove. When a relative asked James if he was all right, all he said was: "Sad, sad, sad."

Di describes James's poignant behaviour at the funeral service: "He managed until he got into the church. And then he saw the casket and then he realised it was Andrew and what this was about. And he went outside the church and he howled twice. And everybody heard it and that sort of broke everybody. It was very hard for a lot of people."

Many of Di's yoga teachers and friends were among the 500 who attended the

service, held on Friday July 30th. The following Monday, Di went back to yoga.

"I wanted to go," Di says, offering a powerful affirmation of yoga's role in her life. "I feel – as I have always felt – that having that as a part of my life is an anchor to me, and it provides me with such calm that it's a positive and it balances the negatives that may appear in my life and do appear in my life."

I ask Di if she has religious or spiritual beliefs that have helped her through her challenges.

"I'm not a religious person," she says. "But from a spiritual point of view I do feel that there's something intangible that happens during the practise of yoga. It's not something that I can rationalise or would want to rationalise, but I feel that I go out a different person than the person who went in. And if that's spirituality, then for me that's what it is. Somehow I connect with something that's deeper than what I can usually embrace in my day-to-day life and it sustains me."

As we reach the present in Di's narration of her dramatic life, I ask her if she doesn't,

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in some dark moments, bemoan the cruel hand fate seems so often to deal her. She brushes such thoughts off, saying that she has always been a positive, optimistic person. In illustration of her positive outlook, she points to one consequence of Andrew's death.

"Since Andrew has died I have got to know a lot of his friends, whom I didn't know particularly well before," she says. "So in a sense Andrew doesn't continue but his world continues and that means a lot to us."

Di has found in yoga a practice that offers a parallel for dealing with life's tragedies and trials.

"Life does go on, in the face of tragedy, in the face of difficult circumstances. But I must say that the practise of yoga teaches me that. A lot of the postures, they're difficult,

they're not easy to master, just as life is not easy to master. But if you take small steps, just one step after the other, then you can achieve it. And that's the way it goes."

I come home from my interview with Di Taylor subdued and humbled. Her steady voice, her positive philosophy and her commitment to yoga in the face of deep personal suffering are impressive and inspiring. Perhaps, I reflect, those of us whose tests are yet to come can be encouraged by Di's example, and learn from yoga to take the small steps that lead us towards hope.

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