

Something is happening in Sweden

...and exhale! Now, slowly open your eyes and come back to the room.

The setting is a small gym at the physical therapy clinic of Danderyd's hospital a few miles north of Stockholm. I am standing in front of a small group of men and women, all of them with recent myocardial infarctions and here for their weekly rehabilitation session. Since January 2010 one-hour Yoga sessions have been part of the hospital's regular treatment strategy for this type of patient.

Yoga? As part of ordinary treatment programs in Swedish hospitals? How did this happen?

In the fall of 2007 the heart clinic at Danderyd's hospital booked an introduction to Medical Yoga at a kickoff event. Medical Yoga, developed at the Institute for Medical Yoga (IMY) in Stockholm, is a therapeutic form of Kundalini Yoga based on the teachings of Yogi Bhajan. At this session doctors, nurses, and physical therapists took part in an hour of Yoga. We did simple *pranayama* like long deep breathing, a few bending and twisting chair exercises for the spine, and deep relaxation ending with a simple pulse meditation. Everyone found the Yoga so fascinating that it was decided to run a small pilot study with Yoga at Danderyd as a secondary prevention against myocardial infarction.

The study started in December of 2008 with 30 patients doing Yoga once a week for 12 weeks, with home assignments; another 30 patients received ordinary post-operation rehabilitative physical therapy. A home assignment, largely mirroring the introductory session we'd led, consisted of 30-40 minutes of 4-6 simple exercises. The patients receiving Yoga all had better outcome measurements than the control group for cortical levels, blood pressure, sense of well-being, and subjectively improved overall health.

As a result of this small study, together with all the already published international studies on Yoga for the heart, the decision was made to implement Medical Yoga as part of regular rehab programs at Danderyd.



Media caught on. First there was a program on national radio; then several national television stations picked it up as a news story. Some 40 newspapers and magazines—even BBC World Radio—had pieces on hospital yoga in Sweden. The media coverage accelerated interest from other hospitals. A children's hospital in Gothenburg booked training for all of their physical therapists; a unit working with eating disorders in a Falun hospital booked a full semester of training for their entire staff.

At Danderyd where it all began the stroke unit decided in September 2010 that they also wanted to take part in this interesting new (or should I say old?) method, and will start using Medical Yoga with patients early in 2011. The same hospital also has another study on Medical Yoga for people with atrial fibrillation, running from November 2009 until March 2011. More studies are on the way in Sweden.

The Karolinska Institute in Stockholm is studying Medical Yoga for spine problems (not to be confused with the Karolinska University Hospital in Stockholm, which is starting a study on Medical Yoga and heart failure, in



March 2011). At the Falun hospital where training took place for Medical Yoga and eating disorders, a study on that subject is planned.

IMY has been working toward developing Yoga programs for patients with heart disease and other health challenges for more than 12 years. In 2010 some 300 nurses, doctors, physical therapists, and others have taken its trainings.

Sweden is a small country in northern Europe near the Arctic Circle and is roughly the same size as California but with a population of just over 9 million. Since World War II Sweden has been the European country that most closely follows American trends. So it should surprise no one that Yoga is as popular and in demand in Sweden as it is in the United States. Every gym and fitness center has one or two brands of Yoga to offer. Yoga courses can be found in many workplaces and it is estimated 500,000 people practice Yoga in one way or another. The three major Yoga forms found in Sweden are Power Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, and Kundalini Yoga.

The medical world in Sweden has been very restrictive toward Yoga and has thus



far only allowed Medical Yoga from IMY and Satyananda Yoga to be used as treatment for patients. The Satyananda Yoga School is involved in an ongoing project with Yoga for patients with cancer at the

Akademiska hospital in the city of Uppsala.

The current attitude toward Yoga in Swedish hospitals is a result of medical authorities' demands for solid—preferably Swedish—research on the effects of Yoga therapies before they allow the use of Yoga or any other alternative therapy with patients. All of the ongoing and planned research paves the way for more Yoga in Swedish hospitals in the years to come. Other Yoga systems are closely monitoring this process and will surely follow in our footsteps. **YTI**



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