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Aussie apostle of Ayurveda

A book by former Australian professional footballer Mark Bunn, released throughout India, has definitely broken the mould in that it is in no way a conventional sporting memoir, says alan mcdonald

AT the end of their careers many sportsmen and sportswomen publish books that reflect on their achievements and disappointments, offer first-hand insights into the game and, for good measure, throw in some gossip and intrigue. Mark Bunn, a former Australian professional footballer, has recently written a book that has been released throughout India (in fact, the entire subcontinent). And it definitely breaks the mould — in no way is it a conventional sporting memoir. *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Health* is a compelling work that challenges modern day health care. It explains how the way forward for individual and national health lies in reconnecting with knowledge from the past — to India's ancient wisdom of Ayurveda.

Wherever you go in India, you don't have to look far to see youngsters playing cricket on a vacant plot with whatever makes do for a bat and some stumps. In the winter months in Melbourne, where Bunn was born and raised, you don't have to look far to see young kids playing football as part of a junior team or with mates in the backyard, dreaming of one day emulating the feats of their football heroes. Bunn grew up wanting to play professional AFL football, Australia's No.1 game that is followed as passionately as cricket is in India. At 19, this ambition was realised when he was selected to play at the senior level and spent six years appearing for two different AFL teams.

From the outset of his career, Bunn's mindset was unconventional. He loved the passion of the game, the exhilaration of playing in front of up to 60,000 spectators and the anticipation of winning a premiership and the glory that goes with it. But all of this was tempered by another thought process. In the back of his mind was an ever-present desire to reach the end of his football career and look back on his achievements with pride, but to do so with a body and mind that was not too battered.

There is no escaping the reality that AFL football, especially at the highest level, is a very physical game. Rigorous training, the physical intensity and frequent injuries (big and small) all take their toll on players. Bunn did not want his football career to be detrimental to the remainder of his life and, as fate would have it, two significant things happened at the start of his career that helped him achieve this desire.

In his first year of playing, Bunn learned Transcendental Meditation to help improve his football and in the process found that the calmness and clarity provided by the meditation brought benefits to other aspects of his life. A few years later he was given a book about Maharishi Ayurveda, which provided a completely different view of exercise. The book explained how, when done correctly, incorporating the timeless principles of yoga, exercise could create "peak experiences" and not only be enjoyable but exhilarating, even blissful. Bunn incorporated Ayurvedic approaches to exercise — especially the concept of deep, diaphragmatic nasal breathing — into his training regime with great results. He also added a set of yoga asanas to his twice-daily meditation practice. At the end of each football season, when many players went off on wild, end-of-season "footy trips", he would attend meditation,

panchakarma and yoga retreats to rejuvenate body and mind.

The decisions Bunn made during his football career to learn meditation and make use of Ayurveda brought about enduring changes to his health and wellbeing. They also opened his awareness to new and deeper principles in life and sparked an interest in the wisdom of ancient cultures, both of which have proved pivotal to the life that has unfolded for him after football.

During his travels to South-east Asia at the end of his career, Bunn was confronted by a fundamental dichotomy. He met so-called “simple folk” there, who barely possessed a roof over their heads and clothes on their backs, yet were nearly always smiling or laughing. They seemed genuinely happy, despite their distinct lack of material possessions, challenging life circumstances and limited access to modern medicines. When he returned home to Australia, however, he saw people everywhere with relative riches and supposedly the best health system in the world, yet drowning in depression, anxiety, stress, obesity and a myriad other health conditions.

In hindsight, Bunn could appreciate that this was the start of a process whereby he began to question whether all that was “Western/modern” was good and conversely all that was “Eastern/ancient” was redundant. It would be great if the West could have more peace and happiness and the East could have a better material life.

At the time when Bunn began to question the efficacy of modern health care, he visited Cambodia where he spent three months working for an aid organisation. Part of this involved travelling to remote villages and helping an Indian vaidya who was treating sick people and administering locally grown herbal medicines. Bunn was fascinated by what he saw and learned and decided to study Ayurveda formally.

In 2000, he completed his studies in Maharishi Ayurveda, a modern-day restoration of the practice initiated by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi – who took Transcendental Meditation to the West. At the end of his studies, Bunn had a “once in a lifetime” experience of travelling around Australia for almost two years with an international team of Maharishi Ayurveda vaidyas. He sat in on hundreds of personal consultations, and learned first-hand much of the ancient Ayurvedic wisdom, including the ancient art of “pulse diagnosis”. Bunn writes, “This whole experience of spending so much time with such great vaidyas really opened my eyes to the value of Ayurveda. Patients would come in with chronic conditions that had been plaguing them for weeks, months, even years, and time and again they would experience profound improvements in their symptoms. Many shed excess kilograms they had not been able to budge in years. Some began sleeping again after months of insomnia. Others experienced significant relief from — or even overcame longstanding medical conditions.”

He also became fascinated with the extensive research done throughout the world on long-living population groups such as the people of Hunza, Vilcabamba, Abkhazia and Okinawa. Even today these cultural groups have people living to 80, 90 and 100 years of age, with little or no incidence of cancer, heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, obesity, arthritis etc. He sums up the impact this had on him, “It’s amazing really. Each year we spend billions and billions of dollars on new pharmaceutical drugs and ever more expensive surgical treatments and medical interventions that cripple our economy, yet we barely spend a cent looking into cultures whose people have lived long, healthy lives for generations with a relative absence of both physical and mental disease. The majority of the healthiest, longest living individuals throughout history have never heard the results of even one scientific study on health. They have never heard of good fats, bad fats or low carbohydrate diets, and would screw up their faces in ignorant pain if you started talking about Omega 3s, antioxidants, phytochemicals, glycemic index, good bacteria or optimal heart rates. Westerners almost drown in such information — yet have rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, obesity and stress disorders in epic proportions!”

Common to all these long-living population groups was an ability to exist in tune with nature’s daily and seasonal cycles, to follow its laws. Bunn appreciates that this is a fundamental guiding principle of Ayurveda and discusses this in some detail in his book. For the past 15 years he has travelled throughout Australia, spreading the information he has gleaned to leading corporate, educational and health professional groups. He gives

presentations to up to 10,000 people a year on topics such as health, work/life balance and stress management, with clients including most of Australia's largest corporations. (From January 2012 he will also be available to speak at conferences and to companies and business groups throughout India.) In February 2011, he and wife Karen spent a month in Delhi, at the clinic of renowned vaidya JR Raju, one of the world's greatest exponents of pulse diagnosis. They both experienced a range of Ayurvedic panchakarma treatments such as warm herbal oil massages, steam baths and shirodhara. Bunn also gained valuable knowledge on the preventive value of Ayurveda to incorporate into his work in Australia. He and Karen plan to undergo similar treatments in their next visit to India.

Bunn feels all professional sportsmen and sportswomen would benefit from the use of Ayurvedic knowledge. The Indian cricket team – without doubt the most famous group of professional sportsmen in India — would benefit greatly. He says, "First and foremost, they should all learn Transcendental Meditation. Former Australian cricket captain Steve Waugh used to regularly comment on how significant the mind is at the highest level of cricket where the game is 90 per cent mental, where the game is won or lost predominantly in the mind. Extensive scientific research shows that Transcendental Meditation is the most effective technique for providing calmness and clarity of mind.

No matter how much good advice someone receives from a coach, no matter how many times someone practises in the nets, in the end it is their state of mind when they walk on to the pitch that separates champions and greats from average players.

"The relaxation and self-understanding derived from Transcendental Meditation would also benefit players off the field, within their personal lives. Practising the technique for a few minutes each morning and evening would provide players with a quiet haven, a place of solace far from the endless 'noise' of national expectation, adulation and public scrutiny. It would help them being a husband, a father, a son and a friend.

"I would suggest that the fitness and exercise regimes used by the Indian cricket team should incorporate knowledge from Ayurveda. In particular, they should learn the concept of deep, diaphragmatic nasal breathing. This would enhance their physical performance without laying the seeds for future injury and illness that occur when 'conventional' mouth breathing is used during exercise. Nasal breathing makes better use of the body's ability to take in oxygen (and prana or life-force) to give improved muscle performance and reduce tissue damage, thus reducing the need for recovery. The concept is simple and easy to apply and yet continues to be overlooked by most athletes and sporting professionals as well as everyday people doing their daily exercise.

"The heavy playing schedules experienced by Test cricketers also place considerable strain on their physiologies, giving rise to niggling injuries or more serious career-threatening problems. To combat this, they would derive enormous benefits from the rejuvenation therapies of Ayurveda, especially the daily oil massage (abhyanga) and panchakarma treatments. Ayurveda's knowledge of the daily cycles and of how to tailor diets to an individuals' unique dosha body-type (prakriti) could also be used to help the Indian cricketers adjust to jet lag and frequent travel as well as optimising energy levels and sustained performance."

Rajendra Kher, five-time award-winning author of bestselling Marathi books like Deha Zala Chandanacha, Geetambari and Dhananjay says of Bunn's book, "In the modern era, many people have lost their peace. My friend Mark Bunn, who has extensively studied ancient scriptures and teachings, reminds us of the age-old wisdom of our own Ayurvedic tradition, for returning to a more peaceful and meaningful life."

For further information, visit www.markbunn.com.au

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