

Higher Power

A modern man's guide to yoga, the world's oldest fitness program

"What am I selling, cheesecake?" yells Bikram Choudhury. "No! Pain -- that's what I'm selling!"

And my twisted muscles are screaming for mercy. Teetering on one leg, I've got the other leg wrapped over my knee, my foot hooked around my calf (in the ancient posture of One Who Has to Go). My arms are tied in a similar knot. Choudhury has sadistically cranked the thermostat up to 105 degrees here in his L.A. yoga studio, and I'm drenched in sweat.

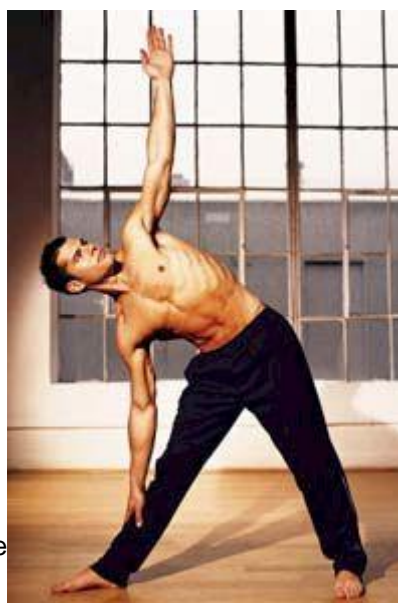
My attempt to hide in the back of class isn't working: Choudhury sees that I'm doing the Eagle pose all wrong. A short, balding fellow from India with a tuft of hair springing from the top of his head, he strides through this tanned, hard-bodied crowd wearing only a black Speedo and a diamond-studded wristwatch.

Choudhury unfolds my arms and jerks them into correct position as if I were a balloon animal -- Ow! What was that popping sound? -- and leaves me there wobbling, slipping. At least he hasn't jumped on my thighs, like he did to the poor guy who was lying on his back, legs tucked beneath him in the Fixed Firm pose. Then he yelled at him, like a football coach hazing a new recruit, "You took the virginity of *how* many girls in high school?"

An Indian guru using locker-room antics to whip a sweaty crowd of a hundred trendy Los Angelinos into shape -- could yoga get any more mainstream? Today, about 20 million Americans study some form of yoga, more than twice as many as five years ago. Yoga books compete for spots on the bestseller lists. Christy Turlington has tied herself in knots on the cover of *Time*. Even swaggering, testosterone-filled outfits like the New York Giants and the Los Angeles Lakers are leading their players through the Hand to Big Toe and the Sun Salutation.

With roots going back 3,000 years, to Pakistan's Indus Valley, yoga was introduced to Americans first as a spiritual path, then as alternative medicine, then as a route to sexual bliss. Today's explosion comes from its incarnation as a fitness routine. Exercise physiologists are finally acknowledging that there's no better way to increase flexibility, align skeletal and muscular structures, and reduce injury. And those are just the measurable benefits. Yoga devotees believe its greatest attribute is more ethereal: the preternatural sense of calm and well-being that comes from training your mind to focus intensely, moment to moment, on what your body is doing.

Before my torture session with Choudhury, I had tried yoga a few times, mostly out of



boredom with conventional means of staying in shape. Let's face it: The Western workout basically comes down to pumping iron, riding a stationary bike, and tossing in some crunches and stretches, a fragmented, purely physical approach that seems designed to keep you restless and dissatisfied. Getting more serious about yoga struck me as a way to fill in some of the gaps. But how, exactly? Yoga isn't something you can just jump into on your own. Some people take four or five classes a week for years before they feel they've mastered the various asanas, or poses. Not only didn't I have that kind of time, but I wasn't interested in giving up my weights-and-cardio routine or my weekly basketball games to make room for extensive yoga instruction. Still, there had to be a way -- short of trying out for the Lakers -- to synthesize the proven sports-science techniques of the West with the ancient wisdom of the East to create a fitness plan that offered the best of both worlds.

I started by narrowing the field. From the hundreds of yoga styles being taught in the U.S., I chose the three types most likely to appeal to a recreational athlete and decided to spend a month trying them out. The world of yoga is a bewildering place, full of hybrid styles and disputes over authenticity, with no central regulating body, though a White House commission is studying the idea. Hard science and quietly devoted teachers often clash with miraculous claims and over-the-top characters like Choudhury, who drives a Rolls-Royce and rarely misses a chance to remind you that his clients include Michael Jackson and Kareem Abdul-Jabaar. "My nickname is Guru of the Stars," Choudhury tells me in his office after class, still padding around in his Speedo. "I've taught more power players than anybody else in the history of civilization." Though widely recognized as a pioneering teacher, he claims that his is the only true style of yoga taught in America.



BIKRAM YOGA

High Heat

In brief: Not for the faint of heart, it's 90 minutes of challenging poses in extreme heat. One class for all levels. **Good quality control** -- all classes the same, nationwide.

Required text: Bikram's Beginning Yoga Class, by Bikram Choudhury (Tarcher/Putnam; \$18)

Web: bikramyoga.com

Bikram is all the rage these days, with more than 100 branches of Bikram's Yoga College of India in 12 countries. One obvious reason is that all the sweating makes you feel like you're getting a good workout. And you are. In fact, if you're anything like me, after a 90-minute class you won't be able to get up off the mat for a while.

The premise here is that heat loosens up the muscles, ligaments, and tendons, allowing for deeper stretches. This is generally supported by sports physiologists, with the caveat that anyone with a heart condition should proceed cautiously.

Like most yoga schools, Bikram's teaches hatha yoga, which is the physical form of yoga, as opposed to its more mental (raja) or spiritual (bhakti) forms. All styles of hatha draw from the same ancient texts, with the differences lying primarily in which asanas are emphasized, their sequence, their duration, and, in Bikram's case, the size of the teacher's heating bill.

Choudhury has a serious yogi pedigree (at age 11, he was the youngest contestant ever to win the National India Yoga Competition) and has been refining his system for 30 years.

Sitting on a platform in front of the class, he starts us off with a pranayama, or breathing exercise, in which we interlace our fingers, knuckles up, beneath our chins and inhale deeply through the nose for a count of six, raising our elbows as high as possible, then slowly exhale through the mouth and drop our heads backward. Now that we know what it feels like to really breathe, we start mixing in the school's 26 asanas -- standing, lying, and sitting poses that require tremendous stamina and concentration -- as Choudhury describes each in perfectly timed detail and reminds us to "keep breathing!"

In Bikram classes, there are no inverted asanas, such as handstands, so there's no specific emphasis on upper-body strength. But as with all forms of yoga, the simple act of getting your body into positions it's not used to, and holding them, will make you stronger.

When Choudhury has you lie on your stomach and assume the Bow pose, for example, you're not just stretching, but also strengthening the muscles in your abs, biceps, thighs, and hips as you strain your arms back to grab your feet. This feels awkward (okay, stupid) at first, but that's because most guys have never moved like this before. But soon you begin discovering muscles you never knew you had, and those tight, injury-prone areas -- like the hips and shoulders -- start opening up. With the greater range of motion comes more torque, and with more torque comes more power. "We see athletes, after practicing yoga, doing things they never imagined they could do," says Stephen Gray, CEO of Next Health, a new 7,700-square-foot gym in Aurora, Colorado, that integrates yoga and other Eastern arts with traditional gym workouts. "They break through to the next level and say, 'Wow, was that me?'"

At the end of my first Bikram class, I'm just hoping I can walk out of the room under my own power. Then I return to New York and take a couple of classes at a Manhattan Bikram branch, and I find myself becoming addicted to the steamy punishment.

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Photograph by: **Rob Howard**

Grooming by: **Kevin Donlin for Price Inc.** Clothing by **New Balance**

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