

Competitive spirit turns yoga world on its head

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9 Octobre 2004

It is wind chimes at dawn as barefoot warriors from around the world converge on Hampstead to pit Ying against Yang in Europe's first yoga championships.

A fight to the death might not have been what the Shamen had in mind in the third century BC. But today, 25 of the world's most ambitious contortionists will turn the practice on its head in their attempt to redefine a leisure-time pursuit as a highly competitive sporting contest.

There are ambitions to turn what has become a favourite de-stressing tool among Western pop stars, vegetarians and hunch-shouldered executives into an Olympic event. Many may balk at the notion of yoga being turned into a prize fight. As in synchronised swimming, contestants will be marked on their posture, strength, style and grace.

A concept devised by the controversial weight-lifter-turned-yoga entrepreneur, Bikram Choudhury, the European Yoga Championships have infuriated some practitioners who claim that the event goes against the practice's spiritual, non-competitive principles. Organisers have hit back by claiming that only snobbish Western practitioners have a problem with the idea -yoga competitions have been held in India for thousands of years.

Mr Choudhury, now a full-time resident of Beverly Hills, with a car collection, did little for the inner peace of fellow yogis earlier this year when he threatened to sue for Pounds 800,000 anyone who teaches his postures.

The pioneer of so-called "hot yoga" which is performed in a mirrored room in tropical temperatures now harbours ambitions to turn this afternoon's competition at Hampstead Town Hall into an Olympic event.

Yesterday, the event's 14 British entrants assumed poses in a West London studio to prepare themselves for an afternoon of gruelling postures on a specially built stage. Although their timed performances will receive marks out of ten in front of a crowd of hundreds, organisers insist that the event is not competitive. "This is a competition not against anybody else but against yourself," said Rajashree Choudhury, Bikram Choudhury's wife and one of the three judges.

"The problem in this world is that we're always comparing ourselves with others and this causes envy and jealousy. If we practice yoga we can be a better person within ourselves."

Mrs Choudhury denied that the losers would feel envious of whoever wins.

Mark Oram, 30, a former website designer from London who will be assessed on completing five postures within a three-minute time limit as well as "walk, style, gracefulness and general appearance" said that he did not think the competition undermined the principles of yoga. "I'm competing for myself," he said. Mr Oram hopes to impress judges with his version of "the pigeon" posture.

Should Mr Oram be tonight's champion, he will receive as his prize plane tickets and entry to the International Yoga Championships which are held in Los Angeles.

Mrs Choudhury said that members of the Olympic Committee had confirmed their attendance at the event in February to assess whether yoga can become eligible as an Olympic sport by 2008.

But such ambitious plans have drawn criticism from some leading figures in the British yoga world.

Mary Attwood, manager of the Life Centre, said: "I don't think that's what yoga's about at all. Once you bring it into an Olympic context it becomes a different thing."

Leela Miller, one of the country's most respected yoga teachers, said: "A lot of Westerners have a tendency to always want to be better and yoga keeps that in check. If you put it on television and you make the focus goal-orientated it sets up towards a lot of controversy."

Other teachers are more open-minded. Tara Fraser, who runs Yoga Junction in London, said that many teachers had become too precious about the issue. "I can see why people would condemn it but I do regret the snobbery and division in the yoga world," she said.