

TIME

Is It Hot Yoga Or Just Balmy?

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The parking lot outside my health club is, as always, dog eat dog, and by the time I find a spot, I'm sure I've lost out on prime classroom positioning. I may end up next to the Grunter, which would, I have to say, harsh my mellow. But in the spirit of the yogic tradition I choose not to view my exasperated state as a negative thing. Instead, I congratulate myself for my good judgment in getting to this yoga class on a Sunday morning at the godless hour of 9:15.

I am a conscientious but nondenominational exerciser, and coming to Bikram (a.k.a. "Hot") Yoga began more as a scheduling convenience than devotion to its unvarying regimen of 26 poses (asanas), each performed twice and held for what can seem like forever over the course of the nearly two-hour class.

Yoga comes in almost as many guises as there are yoga instructors, but most classes build on the same basic foundation of poses performed sitting, standing and lying down. Although some, like the Sun Salutation, consist of a progression of steps, more often the goal is to work gradually toward a single ideal shape: the bow, the triangle, the cobra. My needs are simple: I want supervised, intensive stretching, and every yoga class I've ever attended offers at least that.

The truth is, I hated this Bikram class when I started. At first I returned only because I was desperate--the victim of a muscle-kinking bout of business travel (cramped airline seats and strange beds). Our teacher, Leah Weisman, seemed to talk incessantly. The room was always full, from 30 to 50 people. And the space was intentionally overheated.

True Hot Yoga requires a room temperature as high as 105[degrees]F, supposedly so muscles warm up quickly and stretch more easily. This gym's drafty old studio achieves only Balmy Yoga--about 81[degrees]F--which is just as well. I've experienced optimal Bikram temperatures just once, and frankly, that's way too much bodily fluid shared and dripped and flicked around among a bunch of people who know one another in anything less than a biblical fashion.

But the thing I hated most about the class was that at the very end, while everyone was resting for a few minutes in the stillness of Shavasana, the corpse pose (designed to quiet the mind), Leah broke into song. Classroom scuttlebutt is that she has been known to sing On a Clear Day, You Can See Forever, but I've only heard her sing verses from New Age-y folk tunes that mention planets spinning around the sun and the Earth Mother calling her children home.

Why torture myself so? Simple: love triumphs over hate. As it turns out, Leah is an excellent teacher. Week after week she goes through the same routine without ever falling into autopilot. She is very "present in the moment," as she might describe it. Leah offers cautions

about overexertion, suggestions on how to do each pose at various levels of challenge, and great good humor. Last week she talked about a meditation seminar she had attended and called the impromptu lecture her "sermon on the mat."

As a gasping heater blows lukewarm air around the room, she intersperses practical instruction ("Pull up your quads as you pull down your hamstrings") with abstract concepts ("Remember, you're burning new neurological pathways") that I take or leave, depending on my mood.

Leah wanders among the students, propelling the class forward even as she stops to adjust an arm angle here or perform a thyroid-massaging chin tuck there. She urges noncompetition, with oneself ("However you do the posture today is how you should do the posture") and with others ("How can you compare yourself to your neighbor? You don't have the same body!"). Her monologue becomes a mantra, returning my oft-wandering focus back to the pose I'm attempting. Where is my center of balance? Can I feel my spine stretch if I imagine my head and tailbone pulling in opposite directions? How does my alignment shift when I turn my foot three degrees to the right?

Some people criticize Bikram for being too arduous, but as with all yoga, much of the responsibility falls to the individual. I welcome this opportunity to eschew faster, higher and stronger in favor of deeper. In this regard, the simplicity of Bikram's poses is one more way to avoid being distracted from myself.

To spend this much time slowly and gently stretching is a luxury that I enjoy nowhere else in my life. At the end of the class, after Leah has thanked us for letting her teach and told us to congratulate ourselves for getting up so early, I feel calm and loose and energized. Muscle kinks have dissipated. I feel more powerful, and for the rest of the day standing straight is a relief rather than a discipline.

As for the singing, I still wouldn't mind complete silence in those final minutes of rest, but I'm starting to see it as Leah's goodwilled send-off into the day. And every week I find myself eternally grateful that at the very least, Leah can carry a tune.

--By Lise Funderburg