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Yoga's Bad Boy: Bikram Choudhury

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BY **LORAIN DESPRES** | AUG 28, 2007



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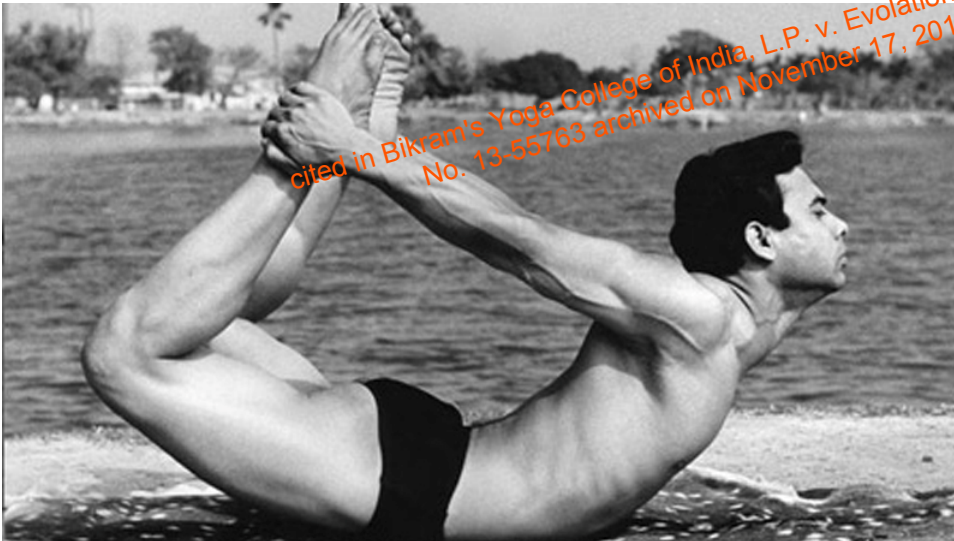
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Bikram Choudhury, self-proclaimed guru to the rich and famous, has led the good life. He makes no secret of his stable of Rolls Royces, his mansion and swimming pool, and his vaunted friendships with Hollywood stars. He's referred to this eponymous yoga as amusing and glamorous.

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Take a Look!

I'd heard his classes were torture and his studio a sweatbox, but he must be doing something right, because in the last few years Bikram-method yoga schools have been springing up all over the country. To find out more, I go to the source.

Bikram exudes warmth and charm and does not suffer from an excess of humility. "I (and the teachers I certify) are the only ones in the U.S. who teach [hatha yoga \(/category/yoga-for-beginners/types-of-yoga/hatha/\)](#)," he announces as soon as we are seated in his cramped office, crowded with family pictures, a framed wedding license, and shopping bags filled with papers and clippings. "Hatha is totally crucified in the United States," he continues, adding something about circuses I don't quite catch. Not wanting to misquote him, I ask, "Did you say other teachers are like circus acrobats?"

"No!" he replies. "I said circus *clowns*. They are all a bunch of clowns." Bikram goes on to insist that his guru, Bishnu Ghosh (brother of the famous [Paramahansa Yogananda \(http://www.yogajournal.com/slideshow/sneak-preview-awake-life-yogananda/\)](#), who founded the Self-Realization Fellowship and wrote [Autobiography of a Yogi \(http://www.amazon.com/Autobiography-Yogi-Paramahansa-Yogananda/dp/0876120796\)](#)), was the highest authority on hatha yoga. "Nobody here knows what the hell they are doing. There is no such thing as Kundalini Yoga. No such thing as Power Yoga. No such thing as Ashtanga Yoga." Bikram claims he alone follows [Patanjali \(/wisdom/2208/\)](#) and teaches true, pure hatha yoga.

Imagining a war breaking out on the letters pages of Yoga Journal, I ask Bikram if he really wants to say such a thing for publication. His reply: "In India there is a saying, 'The truth is the most bitter thing in the world.' From our birth we listen to lies so that we can be happy. Later we learn the truth and hate each other, because life isn't the way we thought it would be. We go to yoga to learn the truth. Even when I give an interview, no matter what I say, I have to speak the truth."

Suddenly, Bikram charges off onto a completely different subject. (Soon after meeting him, I realize this is his usual speaking style. He's like a rap singer, darting from one topic to the next as if his mind were whirring so fast he can hardly keep up). The names of all the famous people he's cured and the medical miracles he's worked seem to circle the room and bounce off the ceiling. "Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. He wanted to play one more year. I make him play seven more years. John McEnroe couldn't walk. His whole left side was shot completely. I make him play six more years. Everyone in this town knows me—politicians, stars, the Hiltons, all the top families."

And there's no doubt that Bikram has played a role in the lives of many well-known people. When you enter his school, you can't help but notice that every square inch of wall space is covered with photos of Bikram—Bikram with Shirley MacLaine, Bikram with Ted Kennedy, Bikram with President Clinton, with Fernando Lamas, with [Indira Gandhi](#), with Mariel Hemingway—along with pictures of Bikram's guru, a statue of the Buddha, and an advertisement for Bikram's Auto Repair with a Rolls Royce logo in the corner. But my favorite image is the photograph of a young Bikram pulling a car with people sitting on the hood and fenders. Underneath is the caption, "Bikram's 24-hour towing service. Can you believe it?" I begin to suspect that Bikram is a man with a sense of humor to match his enthusiasm.

Bikram tells me he developed his method of teaching yoga while he was a student of Bishnu Ghosh. At that time, he says, yoga was taught one-on-one. Someone with a medical problem would go to Ghosh, who would prescribe the series of poses that would best treat the ailment. Then an assistant would work with the client privately in a separate room.

When Bikram opened a school of his own, he realized that working one-on-one was too limiting. He wanted to reach the largest number of students possible. So he devised a standardized series of poses that would address the most common health problems and still be easy enough for beginners in the West.

Bikram freely admits that yogis from other hatha traditions know the same poses he teaches. What makes his system unique, he says, is the sequence in which the poses are done. According to Bikram, each posture in his series forms the perfect basis for the next, warming and stretching the appropriate muscles, ligaments, and tendons. He compares creating his series to creating a song. Everyone knows the same notes, but putting them together in a melodic way is what distinguishes the great composer. According to [Bikram's Beginning Yoga Class \(http://www.amazon.com/Bikrams-Beginning-Class-Second-Edtion/dp/1585420204\)](#), "the twenty-six exercises systematically move fresh, oxygenated blood to 100 percent of your body, to each organ and fiber, restoring all systems to healthy working order." Bikram believes his unique system not only restores any afflicted organ, but also maintains general health throughout the body.

Bikram's "Torture Chamber"

By the end of our conversation, I am eager to experience Bikram's "glamorous" yoga. I have been warned that entering his studio is like walking into a sauna. The temperature hovers between 90 and 104 degrees. I am prepared for the heat, I think—I have dressed for it—but nothing could prepare me for the smell of thousands of hours of sweating bodies.

Bikram keeps the temperature of the room high so that his students will be able to heat up their muscles right away and be prepared for the intensity of the stretches. He believes the warmth is particularly beneficial for people who are naturally stiff or who suffer from arthritis. This sauna effect may not be for everyone. Some students feel so uncomfortably overheated in class that they give up on Bikram's method. Bikram's studio is huge—big

enough to hold 120 people—with a wall of windows in the back, so there is a constant stream of fresh air. But I've heard complaints that in other studios where Bikram's yoga is taught, students often feel breathless in the heated air. And according to Richard Miller (cofounder of the International Association of Yoga Therapists, Miller trained with Bikram from 1973 through 1975 before going on to study with Madras yoga master T.K.V. Desikachar and Advaita teacher Jean Klein), the heat may be contraindicated for people with MS or high blood pressure. For such people, Miller suggests checking with a doctor before attempting Bikram's yoga.

Along with the heat, another standard feature of all Bikram schools is a wall of mirrors. In the Beverly Hills school, photographs of a young Bikram doing advanced poses line the wall above the mirrors. In front of them on a small stage is his throne, a large, beige easy chair, draped with an oversized orange towel.

As I wait for Bikram to arrive, I look around for all the Hollywood glitterati with whom I will be sweating and straining for the next hour and a half. None are present on this Monday morning, but the room fills up with about 80 students in shorts or sleeveless leotards. (I learn later that 50 of them are completing Bikram's summer teacher training course.)

Bikram enters the room, as he always does, wearing only a tiny Speedo and a diamond-studded wrist watch. His hair is pulled into a knot on the top of his head. The students hush as he fixes his chair, climbs onto the stage, adjusts his wireless mike and says, with a twinkle in his eye, "Welcome to Bikram's torture chamber."

In Class With Bikram

As a teacher, Bikram is a natural performer. He sweeps you along with his enthusiasm, jokes, and promises of total health as you sweat and strain through his aerobic yoga routine. "Which is better," he asks rhetorically, "90 minutes of suffering or 90 years of suffering?" Standing on his stage, he's as likely to burst into a chorus of "Tiny Bubbles" as to implore his students to "bend back, go back, way back, lean back!"

Bikram's patter changes according to his whim, but the postures in a Bikram-style class never vary. The series consists of two Pranayama (breathing exercises) and 24 poses. The first breathing practice is done standing, with arm movements that coordinate with each inhalation and exhalation to assist in completely filling and emptying the lungs.

This pranayama is followed by 12 standing poses that take up an hour of the 90-minute class. These poses are all more or less familiar to students of other hatha disciplines. We start in what Bikram calls [Half Moon Pose \(/video/video/half-moon-pose/\)](#), standing with arms stretched overhead, palms pressing together, bending forward, backward, and to the side to stretch and strengthen the abdomen and increase the flexibility of the spine. All the rest of the standing poses—except for Standing Bow, which includes a backbend—are forward bends and balancing poses.

No one demonstrates the poses in the Yoga College of India system. Bikram sits on the stage and gives precise instructions, mixed with jokes and his philosophy of life. According to Bikram, if you listen carefully and follow his directions, you will do the pose correctly. If you do the pose incorrectly, he says, you aren't listening. He's fond of telling his students, "You must listen with all three ears."

Sometimes Bikram comes down from the stage to adjust a pose, but more often, when he catches a student doing a pose that isn't up to his standards, he corrects him or her from the stage. Bikram's verbal corrections are not always gentle. Some students become so offended they don't come back. I saw one student in tears as he repeatedly singled her out for criticism. But when he feels someone has made progress, his praise is equally lavish. The class often stops to applaud the progress of a beginning student or the virtuoso performance of an adept.

After the standing forward bends, Bikram's next five poses require balancing, either on the toes or, in the Eagle Pose, on one leg. Bikram claims with entertaining hyperbole that this pose is "good for sex. Cootchi, cootchi. You can make love for hours and have seven orgasms when you are 90."

Bikram says he stresses the balancing poses because they build focus and concentration. For him, this serves the same function as [meditation \(/category/meditation/\)](#). He does not teach students to sit quietly and breathe or chant. Frankly, after spending a few minutes with this whirlwind, it is hard to imagine him in such a contemplative activity.

Since I have not been doing many balancing poses in my regular practice, I find these postures impossible. I almost never sweat, but big drops pour down my forehead. At the front desk, when I'd been given a clean towel to place on the carpeted floor, and two washcloths, I had asked what the washcloths were for. Grinning, the attendant told me I'd find out. I do. Before I can do the Head-to-Knee Pose (standing on one leg, with the other stretched straight out in front, hands holding the foot), I have to wipe the sweat out of my eyes and dry my hands and foot to stop them from slipping. Even so, I topple over immediately. I look around. A few of the students can hold the poses until the bitter end, but most, like me, are tortured and teetering while Bikram urges us on, admonishing us to work harder, stretch harder. "Pain is good. You Americans taught me, no pain no gain. In India we say, 'No hell, no heaven.'"

Coach Bikram

According to his official biography, Bikram began studying yoga with Bishnu Ghosh when he was only 5 years old. Ghosh trained his young students to become champions. At the age of 11, Bikram became the youngest contestant ever to win the National India Yoga Competition and was undefeated for the next three years. After that he traveled with Ghosh giving weight lifting demonstrations. His competitive background may explain Bikram's style of teaching. He's like a weight lifting or track coach, always exhorting his students to push beyond their limits. Students with special physical problems are supposed to have the sense to take care of themselves, skipping movements that would endanger them. A couple of older students and one who is extremely overweight are allowed to stand against a wall for support, but there are no other props—no blocks, straps, or bolsters. Bikram derides the use of such aids as "furniture yoga."

From the standing poses we go into [Savasana \(/p=16120\) \(Corpse Pose \(/pose/poses/corpse-pose/\)\)](#). After the hard work of the previous hour, being a corpse sounds pretty attractive to me. Bikram stresses the importance of this asana, which he says allows tensed muscles to relax and blood to flow equally to all parts of the body. This two-minute respite is followed by a knee-to-chest stretch, a straight-legged sit-up, and a very brief forward bend in which students try to touch their toes.

On this day, one student bends so far that her head almost touches her feet. Excited, Bikram climbs onto her back. When she manages to touch the top of her head to her feet, the class explodes with applause. Bikram announces proudly that she is the 215th student to do this in his class.

The rest of Bikram's standard series is done on the floor, with the sequence of brief Savasana, straight-legged sit-up, and forward bend inserted between each pose. First come a number of backbends—[Bhujangasana \(/p=16164\) \(Cobra Pose\)](#), Half Locust, [Salabhasana \(Full Locust\)](#), and [Dhanurasana \(Bow Pose\)](#). Bikram urges us on, saying there is no such thing as old age. "You've just been lazy for the last 200 years! I will tell you the same thing even if you say you are 101. Put on your leotard and get to work. Full class every day for two months minimum. Then you will see how silly you were to think you were old."

The backbends are followed by a forward bend, then Half Tortoise Pose, followed by another backbend, [Ustrasana \(Camel Pose \(/pose/poses/camel-pose/\)\)](#). Here Bikram stands on a student's hip bones as she leans back from her knees to touch her feet with her hands. Camel Pose is followed by two more forward bends, a twist, and a final kneeling pranayama, as Bikram talks about the need to unite the mind, body, and spirit. The spirit is nothing without the body, he says. And the body is nothing without the spirit. Our body is God's temple, he proclaims; we must take care of it, keep it healthy, by coming to yoga class every day.

Although Bikram's series is rigorous, aerobic—and, I have to admit, fun—it contains no inverted poses, such as [Salamba Sirsasana \(/p=16124/\) \(Headstand\)](#) or [Salamba Sarvangasana \(/p=16128\) \(Shoulderstand\)](#). Bikram feels these poses are too hard for beginners. He doesn't teach the Sun Salutation for the same reason, considering even [Adho Mukha Svanasana \(/p=16074\) \(Downward-Facing Dog\)](#) too difficult. The only pose in his series that works upper body strength is the Cobra.

For exceptional students, Bikram does offer an advanced course, usually taught by himself, his wife, Rajashree, or Emmy Cleaves, who has studied with Bikram for 25 years and credits him with giving her the courage to stand on her head after a brain hemorrhage. (Emmy declined to give her age, but seemed flattered when I asked if I might say that she's over 60.) Besides the basic 26 exercises, the advanced course includes a Lotus series and many difficult inverted poses. But this course is taught just in the Beverly Hills school, by invitation only, and it's usually reserved for a few of Bikram's most adept teachers.

I feel so energized after my first Bikram session that I return to the Beverly Hills school the next afternoon to experience a class taught by Val Sklar, who runs the Yoga College of India in Pasadena. She teaches the same series of poses, but instead of sharing jokes and songs, Val spends more time on the floor. She extolls the virtues of yoga—all kinds of yoga—as she works among the students and adjusts their postures, giving special attention to the 50 students who will be getting their teacher certification the following Saturday.

A few days later, on a five-day retreat on the Big Island of Hawaii, I experience a third Bikram-style teacher, Bikram's wife Rajashree. Nineteen years Bikram's junior and always elegant in flowing Indian clothes and designer accessories, Rajashree graduated from Mahila Yoga Byam Kendra, Bishnu Ghosh's College of Physical Education, where she received a certificate in the application of hatha yoga therapy for chronic diseases and disorders. She was also the unbeaten five-time winner of the All India Yoga Championship Competition, where she competed against both men and women. Bikram is very proud of her victories, claiming they were the reason he married her. Because you had so much in common? a student asks during the Hawaii retreat. "No!" Bikram says with a sly smile, "So she can keep the school open and support me when I retire."

True to Bikram's system, Rajashree teaches the same poses in the same order, but the atmosphere in her class is very different. Moving across the floor, quietly adjusting a spine here, a hip there, she keeps us focused deeply on the postures. One student later comments that she is sure we are able to hold the asanas longer under Rajashree's quiet guidance. And in her class the restful Savasanas between each of the floor poses seem deeper, quieter, and more refreshing.

On Retreat With Bikram

Attending the five-day retreat in Hawaii allows me to see more of Bikram, his teachings, and his devoted students. Forty teachers and students from around the country have come here to extend their knowledge of the Bikram method—and perhaps to enjoy the lavish facilities of the 34-acre Orchid resort (formerly the Ritz-Carlton), which offers not just yoga but also swimming, snorkeling, sailing, golf, tennis, and a full menu of massages. There is no roughing it at this Bikram retreat.

At the opening session, Bikram leaps onto the stage wearing white pants, shiny white crocodile shoes, and a Hawaiian shirt, entreating us to "Say Aloha!" Then he takes off on one of his raps, bouncing like a superball from one topic to the next. He begins with the beauty of the resort and moves on to the concept of *shanti* (inner peace), segueing from that to the teachings of Jesus, the need for moral discipline, and the fact that Yoga College of India is building schools all over the United States. Bikram says he and Rajashree will continue to give seminars in every state in the union so that he can achieve his most cherished goal: saving America through his yoga.

He ends his talk by telling us to have a wonderful time at his retreat, and by announcing the torture chamber will start the next morning at 9 a.m. There will be a two-hour class every morning and again every evening throughout the retreat. "What you have not accomplished in five years, you will accomplish in five days," he promises.

As soon as he leaves the stage, I can see how his students and teachers admire him. Vying for attention, they cluster around him and Rajashree, clearly mesmerized by his presence. And he reciprocates their affection. Bikram may joke about retiring, but he has no intention of doing so; he says his students are his life.

The Torture Chamber Revisited

During the retreat, Bikram again teaches exactly the same beginning series he offers in his classes in Beverly Hills, using the extra half-hour in each two-hour class to single out students for extra attention.

In the first class, I stand on the side of the room so I can lean on the wall during those impossible balancing poses. At first I get away with this, but when I try it in the second class Bikram spots me and yells that touching the wall is cheating.

To my surprise and pleasure, by the second day—only my fifth lesson in Bikram's system—I begin to see real improvement in my balancing postures. I am able to balance, not just totter. I can even hold many of the poses until Bikram lets us go. I discover one of the secrets of the popularity of Bikram's system. It's not only challenging; if you persist, it's also gratifying to the ego.

However, by the end of my first class on the island, I am also in pain, with sharp twinges radiating down my sciatic nerve. Bikram is delighted when I tell him. "You see, something is moving!" I schedule a massage, rest, ease up in class, and the soreness eases up, too. But toward the end of the week, under Bikram's charismatic urging, I push myself hard in class and again pain shoots through my sciatic nerve, this time like a red-hot poker. The straight-leg sit-ups are impossible, the forward bends painful, and I go home limping. Some of the teachers and other students also admit backaches and most of the attendees do little else at this five-star resort except rest, schedule massages, and attend the two yoga classes each day. When I wonder aloud if Bikram's system is really doing us good, I am deluged with testimonials.

Bikram's "Miracles"

The most impressive asanas at the Hawaii retreat are those of Mary Jarvis, who taught at Bikram's Yoga College of India in San Francisco for 10 years before a car smashed into her and she almost died. Her surgeon cautioned her against any physical exercise. Under his guidance, she stayed in bed, popping pain pills, taking cortisone, and gaining weight. After six months she went back to her doctor, deeply depressed and still in so much pain she couldn't raise her arms. This time he suggested fusing her spine. Mary asked if she'd ever get her flexibility back. The doctor couldn't guarantee it. Could he promise she'd be pain-free? He couldn't guarantee that either. So Mary headed back to the yoga school where she'd practiced and taught for 10 years.

At first the skilled teacher, who'd been so proud of perfecting her advanced poses, felt so much pain that she wanted to scream during the beginner's series. But Mary believed she'd exhausted her other options. Besides, she'd decided, since she had been preaching the benefits of Bikram's yoga, she had to put her body where her mouth was. Some days the pain was so excruciating she would collapse and the other teachers had to call her family to take her home. The Yoga College staff began to believe she needed the spinal fusion operation after all. But Mary persisted, doing two painful classes a day for two years. Now she is mostly pain-free. Her poses are the best at the retreat, and she says she can look at her struggling students and say she knows what they're going through.

Another testimonial comes from Jim Kallett, a former motion picture sound editor who in 1995 was diagnosed with osteoarthritis of the cervical spine. His neck, shoulder, and arm would freeze up periodically, making it difficult for him to work. He had always been athletic; now, at 39, he felt like an old man. His doctor gave him three options: fusing his spine, cortisone shots, or living with the pain.

Instead, Jim decided to try the Bikram school in San Francisco. Jim had tried yoga before and decided it was only for the already flexible, not for stiff guys like him. But in the heated studio he began to experience some flexibility and a slight lessening of pain.

However, it took Bikram himself to really inspire Jim. Bikram promised Jim that if he did yoga once or twice a day for 100 days, he would change his body and his life.

Jim cut back on his editing work, and for the first month, went to class every day. Then he went twice and sometimes three times a day. By the end of three months he started to feel like a normal person again. A year and a half after he took his first yoga class, he and his wife, Emma, signed up for Bikram's teacher training. Jim proudly quotes Bikram who said, "Jim may not be able to do the poses very well, but he has more heart than anyone in the room."

Mary and Jim's stories are two of the many I hear in Hawaii. But would these people be pain-free after the same length of time with a different form of yoga, with a program of physical therapy, or with no treatment at all? No one can know for sure. Mary, Jim, and the others are convinced that Bikram's unique system changed their lives.

And Bikram can be very convincing when he says he can cure anyone. He claims he's cured not only painful ailments, but killers like heart disease and cancer and chronic conditions such as Parkinson's and multiple sclerosis.

Such statements offend some other yoga teachers. Ramanand Patel, one of the most senior Iyengar teachers in the United States, cautions that such claims are ethically, morally, and legally irresponsible unless they can be scientifically documented. According to Richard Miller, who once taught Bikram's system, "When someone touts to the public that he can cure anyone who walks in the door, he diminishes the standards of yoga." Nevertheless, Miller recommends Bikram's yoga to many people under age 45 who want to strengthen their backs and are interested in a good cardiovascular workout. Miller still feels Bikram's series is an excellent all-around practice, but now believes yoga should be more tailored to the

individual. "You can't mass-market it," says Miller. "If you do, you bring it down to a base level." (Miller especially cautions against Bikram's practice for those with sciatica, a warning I could have used before heading to Hawaii.) If you go beyond conversation with Bikram and read Bikram's Beginning Yoga Class, you'll find a caveat to his claims of miraculous cures. In the section "The Magic of Yoga...and of Bikram Choudhury," the book notes that Bikram doesn't mean "cure" in the medical sense of complete disappearance of a disease. According to the book, "When Bikram speaks of curing chronic diseases...he is saying that if you will faithfully follow his directions, you will be relieved of your symptoms of discomfort." The difference between Bikram and most other yoga teachers is the tone of his claims. While others speak of the healing effects of yoga, Bikram boasts of his cures—and contends he is currently pursuing medical research grants (one with the National Institutes of Health) to prove them. Bikram's method might lend itself well to scientific study, because it is taught uniformly by all his teachers, and the availability of instruction is growing as more and more newly certified teachers open schools all over the world.

Bikram Goes Global

The spread of Bikram's yoga exploded when he began offering his accelerated course of teacher training in 1994. Before that, a few students who were personally adept, had studied with Bikram for a long time, and were enthusiastic about his method (like Emmy Cleaves, Mary Jarvis, and Richard Miller) were asked to teach at one of the schools he owned. It took his wife Rajashree to convince him to offer a teacher certification course to a larger population. Rajashree helped to design the certification course based on her training in India. But instead of the three years of study required there, American students can get a certificate from Bikram's Yoga College of India in two months.


A typical Bikram intensive teacher's training schedule in Beverly Hills starts daily at 7 a.m. and ends at 10 p.m., and includes classes in the postures, lectures, and demonstrations. Guest lecturers from the United States and abroad give talks on the body's systems as described by Western allopathic medicine, nutrition, pathology, subtle energy anatomy, and the chakra system. Bikram and Rajashree lecture on philosophy, the theory and practice of his system, yoga therapy, and on the setting up and marketing of a yoga studio.

On the retreat in Hawaii, I am surprised to observe that many of Bikram's teachers, who constitute about half of the attendees, are not especially adept at the postures in his beginning series. Some teachers, like Mary Jarvis, have beautiful asanas, and all the teachers can do the basic poses, but not all can do them with a high degree of proficiency. One retreat participant explains the reasons for this: "Bikram trains great teachers, not contortionists." As she speaks, I realize that since Bikram's teachers don't teach by demonstrating the poses, it's not crucial that they do the poses especially well themselves.


The teachers and would-be teachers I meet are enthusiastic about their training. Some had originally taken the teacher's certification course to improve their own practices, rather than with the intention of becoming teachers. Others were stuck in a series of low-level, dead-end jobs, and were excited about the prospect of teaching. They believe Bikram's certification will turn their lives around.

As these teachers begin their careers, more and more people will soon be able to decide for themselves whether or not they want their yoga in a sweatbox, torture-chamber style. They will be opening schools bearing his name around the country and throughout the world, ensuring that Bikram and his Yoga College of India will be a major force in the yoga world for years to come.

cited in Bikram's Yoga College of India, L.P. v. Evolution Yoga, LLC No. 1:05-cv-055763 archived November 17, 2015

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