

Innovators, Renegades & Entrepreneurs

Hot Yoga in America - Roots & Offshoots

by Peter Sklivas ©2009

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“Where medical science stops, yoga science starts!”

Bishnu Gosh

Hot Yoga in America traces its roots back to a sweaty gymnasium in Calcutta by way of a claustrophobic studio located in the high-rent Shinjuku district of downtown Tokyo. The innovator who piped heat into his yoga classes was a young fitness phenom Bikram Choudhury. He added the heat for a simple reason. Studio members were getting injured doing postures that he had been practicing for years. And he could not understand why. So the yogi asked himself. ‘What is the difference between Calcutta and Tokyo?’

One of India’s foremost physical culturalists Bishnu Gosh had sent his favorite disciple abroad to perform a mission. At the Calcutta airfield before Bikram boarded the eastbound plane Bishnu Gosh issued clear instructions. “I want you to complete my incomplete job.” The young man did not need to be told what his guru’s job was. As the brother of Paramahansa Yogananda Founder of the Self Realization Fellowship, Bishnu Gosh came from a family of bold spiritual aspirants. Countless times in his years of training to become an elite yogi and weightlifter Bikram had been driven by his teacher’s admonition to assist him in performing his job. Put simply, Bishnu Gosh felt it was his job to save humanity. In all sincerity Bikram answered his guru with the promise to do it. So this young man had to discover why the bodies of his Japanese students were breaking down.

The answer came to him in one word. Heat. As a born and bred Calcutta native Bikram had pushed his body to its limits every day as part of his guru’s yoga regiment at annual average air temperature spiking mercury levels twenty-five degrees higher than what he was experiencing in Tokyo. In both cities dew point levels regularly exceeded 80. So the Tokyo air had plenty of moisture. But to Bikram the climate of his new home felt chilling to the bone. Once Bikram added the heat, the injuries stopped happening. Miraculous healings became a regular occurrence. And a new style of yoga was born.

Let’s take a step back. To grasp how hot yoga has unfolded after more than four decades of practice, it helps to examine the roots behind its innovator. Starting from the age of three Bikram was immersed in a lineage of yogis vigorously practicing to develop seemingly superhuman powers. Stopping the heart rate so a yogi could voluntarily bury himself underground for a week or longer. A 7-ton elephant stepping on a yogi’s chest. Driving a fully loaded truck over the abdomen of a yogi lying atop a bed of nails. As a child Bikram witnessed these amazing feats being performed by his guru and others. At age thirteen Bikram’s intense practice paid off when he won the first of three consecutive National India Yoga Championships. In these teen years he traveled as a member of Bishnu Gosh’s troupe of yogis demonstrating the power of mind to control the body. What this period gave Bikram was an unshakable faith in himself and his guru. This faith emboldened the young Bengali to embark on a journey of challenging people all over the world from Presidents to pop stars to heal themselves of maladies that medical doctors could not remedy.

The backbone behind these yoga demonstrations which Bishnu Gosh trained his disciples to perform in a traveling show was a sequence of breathing techniques practiced for hours each day. Besides these impressive physics-defying feats, the breathing techniques

keyed yogis into the capacity to heal their bodies from injuries.

At age 17 while training to break world records in weightlifting Bikram sustained a catastrophic injury when a three hundred and sixty-five pound weight fell on his right knee. European doctors informed the young man that they wanted to amputate the leg. Demanding to be carried back to Gosh's College of Physical Education Bikram knew that if anyone could heal his knee, it was his teacher. Bishnu Gosh had been the first individual to scientifically document yoga's ability to cure chronic physical ailments and heal the body. As an avid motorcyclist Bishnu Gosh had sustained more than twenty injuries on racetracks. Many times he put his body back together using his yoga practice. In his final racing accident Bishnu Gosh shattered his leg so badly that doctors inserted a metal plate in his knee. Bikram's guru never walked again without help. It was for this reason that Bikram and Bishnu Gosh were determined to save Bikram's leg. Bishnu Gosh would do for Bikram what he had been unable to do for himself. Six months later Bikram's knee totally recovered. Healing an injury of this severity was the linchpin that sealed the bedrock faith of this young man. From this point forward Bikram never questioned the universal healing nature of yoga. What will work for one will work for all. This became Bikram's motto. At his guru's request Bikram opened yoga schools in India and eventually in Japan.

One of Bishnu Gosh's breathing techniques became the opening signature posture in Bikram's 26-pose Hot Yoga series practiced now at more than 500 yoga studios worldwide. Pranayama deep-breathing (as Bikram called it) has been proven to expand the elasticity of the lungs and increase circulation of the spine's synovial fluid. Another signature element of Bikram's Hot Yoga is the repetition two sets of each posture in the exact same sequence every 90-minute class without any variations. The first half consists of standing postures. The second half consists of floor postures. Other unique elements include full-length mirrors to correct misalignments and carpeted floors (not wood) to prevent slipping on puddles of sweat. Teachers do not practice when they teach. Standing at the front of the room teachers issue instructions using a specific monologue first drafted by a California entrepreneur and mystic healer Annemarie Angstrom. Acting as his American guru mentor Annemarie Angstrom taught Bikram the value of creating a reproducible yoga system. She pushed Bikram to open his own yoga studio in Beverly Hills so movie stars could flock to his classes. And she encouraged him to train other teachers so this Hot Yoga could reach a population beyond Beverly Hills and Los Angeles. Over the years Bikram has supervised slight revisions to this monologue.

Another unique element to Bikram's Hot Yoga centers around lawyers, lawsuits and money. Starting in 1985 with Hollywood starlet Raquel Welch, Bikram is the first yogi to sue former students for allegedly stealing the trademark on his Hot Yoga Series. Raquel Welch had written *Raquel Welch Total Beauty and Fitness* along with an accompanying Hot Yoga video closely mirroring Bikram's 26-posture series. Garnering rave reviews, the bestselling book and video converted thousands of suburbanites to home yoga practice many of whom later sought out Hot Yoga studios to deepen their practice.

Is it accurate to call Raquel Welch a renegade? Or a clever entrepreneur? Once a devoted student and friend of Bikram, she put out her fitness program without gaining Bikram's permission. The net effect of the lawsuit was to pull these products from the marketplace.

While Bikram has never laid claim to the ownership of any single yoga posture, he does claim copyright and trademark rights over the sequence of 26 postures that he developed. His infamous threats of lawsuits are widely recognized as an attempt to control how Hot Yoga is taught in America and abroad. After 2000 Bikram's yoga teacher

trainings started attracting greater numbers of individuals forcing him to expand into a facility where he could host class sizes topping out at 500 trainees. In the last ten years the popularity of Bikram's Hot Yoga has mushroomed across the globe with an army of constantly recycled new instructors acquiring existing studios and opening new ones. Class sizes across the planet also mushroomed to 30 - 50 studio members. In 2009 scheduling 4 to 6 classes daily in approximately 500 yoga studios from Johannesburg to Kuala Lumpur ... from Winnipeg to Tasmania ... from Santiago to Helsinki, Bikram Yoga is on the cutting edge of redefining how humanity keeps fit.

Stepping away from Bikram's system, some renegades have branched out to innovate their own styles of Hot Yoga. The most widely known of these yogis is Baron Baptiste who incorporated Bikram's heat along with the name that Beryl Bender Birch coined as the title of her bestselling book *Power Yoga*. Baron embodies what it means to be a true innovator. His brand of Power Yoga has adapted elements of Ashtanga Yoga along with traditional dance and fitness workouts which always includes a killer ab burn. Akin to the Bikram approach, Baron's instructors do not practice when teaching. With locations in Cambridge and Brookline, MA, and 39 affiliate studios Baptiste Power Yoga is a fluid vinyasa style influencing a wide swath of Hot Yoga practitioners and teachers around the world. Baptiste Bootcamps have developed a reputation for rapidly transforming lives. Baron Baptiste's book *Journey into Power* set a new benchmark in publishing world for sales on a yoga book.

In Fort Lauderdale Jimmy Barkan is training teachers in a morph of Hot Yoga with his moniker The Barkan Method. Another renegade who channeled his energies into innovation Jimmy has developed a broader curriculum of Hot Yoga offering teacher trainings that has spawned 29 affiliate studios. Up in Toronto Ted Grand and Jessica Robertson offer Hot Yoga teacher trainings with their own brand called Moksha Yoga. On the Thai island of Koh Samui, Absolute Yoga boasts a Hot Yoga teacher training guaranteed to change your life. From the Rocky Mountains of Colorado entrepreneur Trevor Tice has launched Corepower Yoga with 30 locations and a sophisticated website offers online yoga classes. Corepower claims to demystify the practice of yoga making it widely accessible to the masses so that everyone can reap the long-term physical and mental benefits of the ancient practice. Across more than a dozen Texas locations Sunstone Yoga has spread its class offerings out across five different Hot Yoga varieties matching the elements of fire, water, metal, earth and wood.

Whether these entrepreneurial offshoots represent authentic expressions of yoga opens an inquiry best answered directly on the mat. In the decades since Bikram Choudhury first heated up a yoga class back in Tokyo, a steady proliferation of Hot Yoga is setting the stage for a meeting of the influences from India and western fitness and medicine that will bode well for further improvements. Although yoga is touted as an ancient practice, Hot Yoga remains a new phenomenon. In the years ahead it is reasonable to assume innovations will continue to make the practice challenging and safe.

In my studio called Yoga Passion located in Beverly Farms, MA, I teach two styles of Hot Yoga. The first style I call HotCore Yoga. Its standing series mirrors Bikram Hot Yoga. On the floor though I have inserted a wider range of postures that vary from class to class. Frequently I include more hip openers such as Pigeon or groin openers with Frog and Happy Baby. Or I insert more abdominal work or different transitions into a sequence of three or four postures. In a class if the studio members are particularly fit I might put in all of the above. During class I play music which is no-no in the Bikram universe.

What I endeavor to do with HotCore is retain the very best elements of Bikram Hot Yoga:

1. Heat & mirrors. 2. Challenging posture sequences that almost anyone can do. 3. Plenty of Savasana punctuated throughout the second half of the class.

Bikram's genius is that he created a posture sequence that my colleague Ted Lehrman could do after a motorcycle accident sent him flying 40 feet through the air leaving him with three herniated discs in lower spine and two herniated discs in his neck. Doctors had ordered Ted to get rid of his four dogs because walking them posed a serious health threat. Two of his dogs were powerful large animals. A Great Pyrenees and a German shepherd. One doctor predicted Ted would become paralyzed if he walked the dogs. Ted never considered selling his dogs. In his mind there had to be another option. On the internet after considerable research he found it. Bikram's Hot Yoga.

So picture Ted. Five herniated discs and the rest of his body is a wreck from the accident. What saved his life was turning over mid-air enabling him to skid on his leather jacket and beeper both of which melted in the process. So this guy is going to attend a physically challenging Hot Yoga class? Come on! How? He could barely move. Well, here's how.

Every day for more than a year Ted did doubles. Meaning he attended a Bikram class in the morning and a Bikram class at night. In the beginning his physical limitations dramatically reduced his range of motion. But slowly Ted worked his butt off to regain core spine strength in the places that were his weak links. I met Ted in the spring of 2000 when he and I completed the certification for Bikram's Teacher Training. For two months we practiced doubles side-by-side in classes with one hundred other yogis.

Ted had already been in his Bikram rehab for about a year. Still working through physical limitations Ted insisted on rolling out his mat on a spot between the front mirror and one of the narrow mirrored columns so he could see the position of his hips, heels and shoulders when he reached back with his hands in Camel. Burning pain in his spine was still a constant reminder that he was healing his body. But he was walking his dogs every day. Up north of Santa Barbara he and I hiked from Zaca Lake up into the surrounding mountain trails of the Los Padres National Forest.

Shortly after getting his yoga teacher certification Ted opened a Bikram studio in Studio City ten miles north of Bikram's headquarters in Beverly Hills. Today Ted still teaches in this location. So Ted Lehrman is living proof that Bikram Yoga is an effective way to put humpty dumpty's back together again. Could Ted have achieved the same result with another style of yoga or some other physical healing modality? Maybe yes. Maybe no. The fact is that there are lots of Teds in the Bikram scene. Lots of people with broken bodies ... as Bikram calls them 'junk spines' ... these injured people put in time and sweat to regain their life. And it works. In other styles of vigorous yoga I just can't see how Ted would ever have gotten started.

The second style I teach *Power Yoga* is largely influenced by the many classes I have taken with Baron Baptiste. Frequently newcomers ask me to compare HotCore Yoga and Power Yoga. I tell them Power Yoga is like going for a seven mile run while HotCore Yoga is like interval training. Sprint 100 meters. Walk 10 meters. Sprint and walk. Both styles are designed to be an intense psycho-spiritual physical workout. From my experience HotCore Yoga offers a higher rehab value for injuries because the posture sequence shares Bikram's approach. Also with modifications such as using straps and block as props and leaning against the back wall to assist with balance issues, almost anyone can do HotCore Yoga.

When yoga teachers and studio members ask me why I broke away from Bikram's

Method, I point out limitations in its long-term practice that made it impossible for me to continue. First, I'm only aware of two kinds of fitness instructors who tell their students to lock their knees. The first is ballet instructors. Why do they do it? Because it looks pretty. The second is Bikram Yoga instructors. Why do they do it? Because it looks pretty.

From earliest childhood Bikram was trained to perform yoga postures in a highly competitive environment where physical measurements were taken to decide whose posture was best. It is much easier to kick a leg higher in Standing Bow when the standing knee hyper-extends. Plus, the heat allows studio members to get away with poor body mechanics in the early stages of practice and still derive benefit. When individuals hyper-extend their knees repeatedly, what I have observed is that eventually after three or four years most people will over-stretch the backs of their knees.

In my own practice I discovered that when I bent my knee slightly, my overall body mechanics improved. Creating core strength has become a popular jargonism in the fitness world which I never understood until I learned how to draw energies up from the base of my spine. In vigorous yoga styles the action of creating core strength is described by drawing up two bandhas (mulabandha and udyanabandha). In the Bikram Method my approach was considered heresy. And it still is.

As a yogi, though, I love the heat. It feels like the great equalizer for those of us not endowed with naturally supple joints. As an athlete and gymrat in my teens and twenties, I competed in sports that ratcheted whatever stiff range of motion I started with down to the point where getting out of bed in the morning required rolling onto my side and slowly undulating my hips forward and back for ten minutes before daring to get vertical. In 1989 my first introduction to yoga came at Kripalu Center where I practiced their soft style of yoga in a 70-degree room.

Okay, let me clarify. Hard styles of yoga are vigorous practices where yogis regularly work their heart rate up and sweat profusely. Ashtanga, Bikram and their growing offshoots such as Power, Jivamukti, Vinyasa and HotCore are examples of what I am designating as *hard styles*. To an athletic yogi seeking a workout, everything else is a *soft style*: Iyengar, Integral, Shivanada, Kundalini, Kriya, Kripalu, Anusara, Yin, Vini and their offshoots. Hard styles are not intrinsically superior to soft styles. What they offer, that soft styles don't, is an aerobic workout. Of course yoga offers so much more.

It was three years into my service at Kripalu when Yogi Amrit Desai invited Bikram to teach a staff-only weeklong Bikram Yoga intensive. For any master yoga innovator/guru like Amrit Desai to bring another master yoga innovator to teach his method in the ashram is a radical event both for the guru and the disciples. Because what the guru does is chart a course that the disciples follow. As an insatiably curious man Yogi Amrit Desai was always hosting transformation innovators in the ashram. Everyone from the mother of wheatgrass Anne Wigmore and raw food guru Gabriel Cousins to business management consultants and transformational renegade leaders, from The Forum to leading psychologists as well as Indian swamis and gurus from various lineages. But never anyone with the reputation of being as outrageously brash and the seeming anti-yogi that is Bikram Choudhury.

The incredible ashram hype surrounding Bikram seemed antithetical to the purpose of yoga. At the last minute I decided to squeeze my mat onto the carpeted auditorium floor packed with hundreds of mats laid out two inches apart. In the hot auditorium Yogi Amrit Desai was warming up right there with the rest of us. Within minutes of the first posture I got it. The heat made me feel like a superaction hero on a yoga mat. Prowling amidst the forest of sweaty bodies Bikram issued instructions with a rockbed faith and supreme

knowledge that made me feel as though I could look up my butt in the half moon backbend. I felt so incredibly supple and strong that I experienced a yoga epiphany that has stayed with me after all these years.

For Bikram teaching a staff of 350 yogis was also a big deal. The majority of Kripalu's sisters and brothers had been practicing yoga for more than two decades. Many of them were veteran workshop leaders. Not the easiest group of yogis to convert to a completely different method of yoga. Bikram's teacher trainings had not taken off yet. And Bikram was famous for telling his students. 'If you see guru, run the other way. They are all fakers. Bullshit artists!'

Yet at Kripalu Amrit Desai and Bikram embraced each other as the odd couple of yogi brothers. A tall handsome man Amrit Desai approached his spirituality with a sensitive intellectual boyish appetite to learn more so he could teach more. Short and defiant Bikram didn't have to learn anything. He already knew all anyone could ever need to know. Just ask him. And he'd tell you. Very likely it would be spiced loads of profanity. At our ashram I had never heard an f-bomb until Bikram's arrival.

On the marble alter where Amrit Desai sat cross-legged in a terracotta robe with his eyes closed chanting mantras, Bikram danced clad in a splashy-colored tiger-pattern silk robe. Despite their enormous differences these two unlikely men became instant friends. Both of them gushed whenever they spoke about the other. Amrit Desai demonstrated the essence of humility with his willingness to show up as a student like the rest of us in Bikram's Hot Yoga classes. At our evening satsangas Bikram glowed with wonder at the phenomenal eloquence that Amrit Desai brought to our community of aspiring yogis.

Within months Kripalu converted a long wide rectangular room into a space devoted exclusively to Hot Yoga with carpet, mirrors and other Bikram specifications. Bikram left Kripalu with the confidence that, if he could convert so many seasoned yogis over to practicing and his teaching his method, then perhaps he could expand his horizons to train his own army of teachers. This weeklong training had lasting influences on two important diametrically different styles of yoga in America.

How Hot is too hot when it comes to yoga? Type '*Bishnu Gosh*' into Google and you might be surprised at what comes up. Ten pages of references to an international yoga posture competition called the Bishnu Gosh Cup. The enthusiasts of Bikram's hot yoga are organizing a drive to introduce yoga as a competitive event at the next Olympics. Does bringing yoga onto a global scale of competition count as an innovation? Or a corruption? Bikram's position is that it's better for the youth of the world to compete to perform beautiful yoga postures than it is to let young women and men get lost in drugs, alcohol and trivial inert-body pursuits such as videogames, TV and glomming onto the internet as a substitute for normal human socialization. But why can't yoga inspire the masses without dreams of wearing a gold medal? Can't working toward creating a golden body be enough?

Stay tuned! If Bikram and his growing worldwide legion of teachers and studio members have anything to say about it, Hot Yoga is going to keep pushing the envelope of how human beings define yoga practice. Personally, while I don't encourage competition with anyone when I am on my mat or prowling my yoga studio as a teacher, I remain ever-grateful to Bikram for launching this Hot Yoga revolution. After two decades of yoga practice I remain thrilled by the opportunities to keep re-invigorating my body practicing my own brand of Hot Yoga. Regardless of whether I get labeled an innovator, renegade or entrepreneur, I love what Hot Yoga has done for me and the people daring to step through my door and hurl sweat around their yoga mat.

The End