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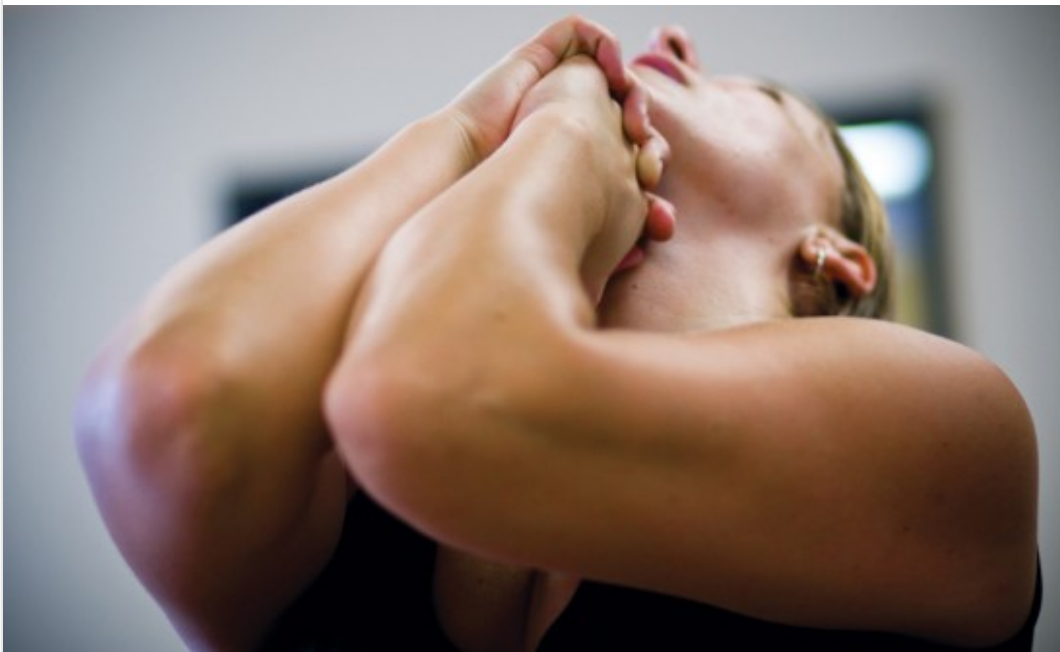
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Yoga Inc.

[2 Comments](#) 05 February 2010



Story by Abigail Diskin

Photos by Rochelle Bargo

We should work until we feel the pain, the teacher tells us, that's how we strengthen ourselves. I feel the

blood rush to my face as it dangles between my legs, my hands pulling on the backs of my heels, forcing my knees to lock and my muscles to release their grip on my lower torso.

Burgundy horizontal lines stretch across the carpeted floor, expanding out like uncoiled ribbons—our guides for the poses. An hour into the class, the heat feels simply unbearable. I look in the mirrors; my cheeks look as though they've been painted with magenta circles and I am drenched in sweat, but so is everyone else.

I am taking beginning classes at Bikram's Yoga College of India in downtown Eugene at the request of the studio's director, Amy Hopkins, who asked that I take at least three classes in order to experience the yoga firsthand before interviewing her.

Bikram Yoga is more than just a tough workout. For some, it's an obsession—one that people are willing to stretch their wallets for: A month's pass costs \$95, and that's with a student discount. Claire Dewey, who has been practicing Bikram for several years, says she's hooked because of the way it consistently makes her feel: balanced, energized, and cleansed. "I think it's the perfect combination of poses and exercises," she says. "It's become my religion."



In the past few years, however, the balance that once existed in Bikram has been pulled off-kilter. A steady flow of controversy over copyright, ownership, and franchise has kept Bikram studio owners on their toes, and left students wondering what the future of Bikram will look like.

Bikram Yoga consists of 26 body poses and 2 breathing exercises, which are performed in a specific order for 90 minutes in a room that is heated to at least 105 degrees. The heat is meant to loosen the muscles and tendons, facilitating deeper stretching and organ cleansing. Teachers must learn a specific script for communicating the sequence, so the same language is used in every class. The repetition of words and poses creates consistency and a framework that enables people to track their progress, Hopkins tells me.

As participants twist themselves like ropes and arch their backs like rabbits, they do so with the purpose of acquiring physical, mental, and emotional strength. Determination, willpower, and faith are three crucial components of Bikram's spiritual philosophy.

Bikram Choudhury, founder and president of Bikram's Yoga College of India, was born in Calcutta, India, and won his first National India Yoga Championship when he was just thirteen years old. What has

followed is a lifetime dedicated to honing his yoga practice and spreading his style of yoga around the world. Story has it, Hopkins says with a grin, that in 1972 Choudhury opened his first American studio after he advised President Richard Nixon about how to best heal his phlebitis. Nixon granted him a U.S. Visa in return.

Choudhury stayed in the U.S., and his yoga stuck. Today, Bikram Yoga studios exist in almost every state. From New York to Kansas to Tennessee, there are rooms full of sweating people performing the same sequence.

Hopkins explained that Choudhury has toyed with the idea of making Bikram Yoga into a franchise for several years. However, when he finally did, it caught many studio owners off guard, including Douglas Macreynold, owner of Southeast Portland's Bikram Yoga studio. He says he was surprised at the audaciousness of the terms Choudhury proposed in his 150-page Franchise Disclosure Document, which included wanting access to studios' bank accounts and a say in their decor. The FDD "is extremely restrictive from a business owner's point of view," Macreynold says. "We were going to have to carry his clothing line, lighting he approved, furniture he approved, eventually colors he approved."

What ensued was yogi resistance. Numerous studio owners, teachers, and students joined together to create Open Source Yoga Unity, a non-profit collective that believes yoga exists in the public domain and thus, no teacher or guru has "the legal right to impose control over another's Yoga teaching or practice." In 2005, OSYU sued Choudhury in Federal Court for his "interpretation of copyright law," claiming that Choudhury "engaged in copyright misuse by sending out cease and desist letters." Several months later, the two parties settled their conflict out of court and the lawsuit was dropped.

A member of OSYU was willing to speak with me about the group's stance on the franchise, but requested anonymity because membership is kept confidential. "OSYU has no design in mind for Bikram's FDD. That is up to him and we wish him all the best. However, if Bikram uses false and misleading concepts of copyrighting to bully or push studios into signing a FDD then we would be there to support those who are being victimized. No yoga is copyrighted."

At Eugene Bikram's Yoga College of India, blue and green mats hang on wooden rods to air-dry outside of the classroom. Near the entrance hang two large framed photographs of Choudhury. In one, he sits in the lotus position on top of a tiger skin, the head of which is roaring ferociously at the camera, filling the space between his legs. He is shirtless, wearing only a small black Speedo and a string of prayer beads. His black, stringy hair hangs just above his shoulders; the oval on top of his head is bald. He gazes serenely at the camera, hands folded in his lap.

In addition to signing the FDD, Choudhury asks that Bikram Yoga affiliates pay a franchise start-up fee of \$10,000 as well as a five percent royalty fee.



Hopkins pushes aside the round coffee table in front of the couch and plops down on the floor in the studio's front room. "This isn't right," she tells me with a hand on her heart. Her teal eyes jump out in contrast to her gray smock. "He's not asking for it out of greed," she says. "He doesn't need to do that; he's not the money monger type."

Choudhury might not be greedy, but he is certainly wealthy. Forbes reports that his several dozen Rolls-Royces or Bentleys are a fine addition to his mansion in Beverly Hills, and his affinity for diamond-encrusted Rolex watches is impossible to ignore since he often wears one while teaching.

Currently, a group of dedicated Bikram teachers who, Hopkins says, wants to sign the FDD but lack the funds, are rewriting it in hopes that Choudhury will renegotiate. Bikram Franchise Representative Allison Butash says that he is doing just that. "We are actually revising the franchise offering right now," Butash says. So once that's finalized, we are going to re-offer it to our existing affiliates to convert. "She says that affiliates have been able to teach yoga using Bikram's brand without any cost (despite the required \$6,600 it costs to be certified by Choudhury) and that a franchise is necessary "in order to preserve the brand and the integrity of the yoga."

If studios do not want to become a franchise, they have two options: change the name of their practice or change the postures. Hopkins isn't sure yet which route her studio will take, but she says she believes that loyal students will still come whether it is called Bikram Yoga or simply Hot Yoga.

Michael Harris, director of Bend's Bikram Yoga studio doesn't feel as optimistic. He says it could take years for studio owners to put together a workable franchise agreement that Choudhury will agree to.

Dewey says she is weary about how a franchise might alter Bikram's spiritual meaning. A franchise "would make Bikram [Choudhury] more money," she says. "He's profiting so much off of a spiritual practice; it seems like it kind of goes against the whole philosophy of yoga."

Ultimately though, "you are going to pay the money," she says, "if you love it that much."

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2 Comments so far

1. *Kelli Harrington* says:
2010/03/23 at 3:18 pm

Hello!

I read your article by Abigail Diskin on Bikram Yoga and would be interested in speaking with the author regarding ZenSpot, Inc. which is a new Hot Yoga studio in Eugene next to the U of O campus. We are the evolution of Hot Yoga with a positive orientation to serve the community and promote a healthy lifestyle and have a number of U of O students as participants at our studio. The author quotes Claire Dewey in her article who has since left the Bikram practice and is a regular student at ZenSpot. I would be interested in getting in touch with Ms. Diskin to see if she would be interested in a follow-up article on our style of hot yoga. I can be reached at kelli@zenspotmbs.com.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Kelli

2. *Emily Hutto* says:
2010/04/27 at 4:44 pm

The New York Times just raised a lot of good points about yoga as a commodity- it made me think of Abby.

Here's the link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/25/fashion/25yoga.html?pagewanted=1&ref=general&src=me>

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- Right now we're working on loading the new print magazine to the website. Let us know if you've got feedback on how to share it best. about 18 hours ago
- [@lyzibang](#) Thanks! Hope you like the video once it launches. about 18 hours ago

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