

Editor's Note

Focusing his profile on an activity rather than a person, Ray Chirgwin uses his experience attending a session of Bikram Yoga to examine the practice of yoga as well as its participants. Chirgwin goes beyond simply listing what a person might perform during a yoga session and instead uses his experience to analyze the effect of American culture on yoga. Consider the role the tone plays in “All-American Yoga.” How would you describe it? How is the tone established—word choice? Organization? Description? How do stylistic choices—such as the repetition of the phrase, “So pure.”—bring unity and coherence to the essay? Does Chirgwin offer a balanced representation of Bikram Yoga and those who practice it?

All-American Yoga

Ray Chirgwin

In the attic of a downtown San Luis Obispo building, a group of men and women quietly assemble for their afternoon yoga session. This, however, is not typical yoga; this is Bikram. As I enter the small space with slanted ceilings, a blast of hot, pungent air hits my face. The room's aroma has been ripening all day from the morning and mid-day sessions. I swiftly shut the door to keep the heat in this sauna-like environment and find an open space on the floor to roll out my mat. Some students lay down in silence letting their bodies acclimate to the temperature. They cover their mats with beach towels to catch the drops of sweat that will fall from their bodies during the next hour and a half of torturous contortions and stretches. I (the newcomer) foolishly wear a cotton shirt, soon to be thoroughly soaked and clinging to my body. The regulars wear nothing but spandex or Speedos revealing their sexy tan and hard abs to prospective partners. A young male loses focus on his own meditation as he catches a glimpse of a desirable woman arching her back to amplify her shiny chest under a tight sports bra. She is so pure. She notices his stare and her heart flutters as she takes a deep inhale. He is the muscular guy who rides a motorcycle and always wears her favorite cologne. He is so pure. Oh, how they love going to Bikram yoga.

Beyond its physical benefits, yoga is also a spiritual practice believed to lead to a profound understanding of existence. It is traditionally a form of meditation and introspection stemming from Indian religion (primarily Hinduism and Buddhism). In the Western world, however, yoga is mainly seen as a form of exercise. Yoga has become incredibly popular in the United States as our culture obsesses over health trends and hot bodies. With the help of one individual, Bikram Choudhury, the art of yoga is

evolving into the latest exercise craze. Bikram yoga is a sequence of 26 asanas (poses) done in a room heated to over 100 degrees. It is believed that the heat helps the body stretch deeper, prevent and heal injury, and expel toxins. Unlike traditional yoga as we know it, Bikram emphasizes physical pain and suffering in order to connect the body and mind. "Once there is a perfect marriage between the body and mind, then you can knock on the door to the spirit," Bikram says. As for now, he believes most Americans are not ready for the spiritual yoga of sitting silently and meditating. Perhaps our culture's body and mind are far from balanced.

I am proud to say that I am becoming a part of the American yoga culture. I can't yet call myself experienced in the practice of yoga but I do know that it feels really good. My first encounter with yoga happened in the comfort of my friend's living room after a long and stuffy airplane flight. She suggested we try a short half hour exercise of a beginner's yoga video. I skeptically agreed, not knowing what I was getting myself into. It turned out to be the clumsiest physical activity I have ever done. I strained to keep good form and fell out of balance numerous times. Nonetheless, that short exercise transformed me into a new being. My body felt as if it had received an intense workout and a relaxing massage all within thirty minutes. I stood taller, breathed deeper, and slept better. My friend told me that if I thought yoga was great, Bikram would be greater.

Originally a yoga master from India, Bikram Choudhury has adopted American mannerisms and business tactics. He is now seeking to copyright his 26-asana sequence and create a multi-million dollar yoga franchise in the United States. Just like a song can be patented, Bikram and his lawyers argue that they can patent this specific sequence of yoga positions. The poses are like notes, having existed for thousands of years, but the sequence is a unique melody that Bikram hopes to profit from. Over 1200 Bikram studios currently prosper throughout the U.S. For every instructor, Bikram charges \$5000 as mandatory certification to teach his techniques. The business holds the nickname "McYoga" and Bikram welcomes the title without shame.

Although Bikram claims "Money is not going to bring humanity and spiritualism into your life," he is fighting hard to control the yoga market and expand his monopoly of a business. His unique approach to yoga thrives enough to make Bikram equal to the stars with his Rolls Royce, Rolex watch, and Beverly Hills mansion. The success of Bikram's yoga originates from his studio in downtown Los Angeles; the heart of American pop-culture. He has taught celebrities such as Madonna, Brooke Shields, and Michael Jackson. Considering our nation's absurd devotion to Hollywood, it is no wonder Bikram's name has spread like wildfire.

After hearing all the hype about Bikram yoga, I decided I wanted to give this fad a shot. Luckily my trial membership only cost 30 dollars for a month, which

was a fraction of the normal fee. The San Luis Obispo Bikram studio normally charges \$15.00 per session. You can pay the extra \$2.00 to rent a towel, or be left with the burden of a sweat-saturated one that leaves an unwanted musky aroma in your laundry hamper. And you can't forget to stay hydrated before and after the session. The regulars prefer \$5.00 bottles of special vitamin and electrolyte enriched water imported from Alaska (so pure). Not only does Bikram yoga require substantial funding, it also entails at least two hours out of your day. After ninety minutes of sweating, a long shower with organic shampoo and conditioner is obligatory. This whole process invites people who have plenty of time and money on their hands (like trophy wives and sorority girls).

Bikram isn't easy by any means. It actually demands intense strength, flexibility, and stamina. The exercise itself is challenging and excruciating at times. Bikram has been known to stand on his students pushing them deeper into the stretch and demanding greater strength. Unlike traditional yoga, the yogi (instructor) shouts out the commands like a drill sergeant telling you to push harder and farther. Salty drops fall from your brow and sting your eyes as you attempt to remain deeply focused on your posture. Your muscles burn in their locked positions. Blood rushes through your joints so you can feel your pulse thump your whole body. You try to inhale more and more, but the humid air doesn't provide relief. The Bikram method is far from comfortable but after all the pain and agony comes a rewarding fusion of energy, relaxation, and happiness. It is a truly unique and enriching experience.

As the students complete their final relaxation, they filter out of the attic classroom feeling revitalized and positive. The fresh outdoor air cools their skin. Now they are ready to carry on with their daily lives. In the parking lot, the young man sees the enticing woman. He feels confidence and clarity so he decides to ask her out for a drink at the local bar. She excitedly takes his offer. They agree on a date and enter the information into their cell-phones both feeling alive and cheery. She drives away in her sporty sedan and lights up a cigarette in celebration of her successful day at Bikram's yoga. Her heart flutters as she inhales deeply. She pictures his strong shoulders and cute smile. Pure beauty. He rides off on his motorcycle proud of himself for pursuing her. On the sidewalk, he catches a glimpse of a gorgeous blonde in a tiny skirt and a spaghetti strap top. Pure beauty.

Ray Chirgwin is an architecture major.