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Bikram Yoga

Novice tries the 'hot version' and finds a great workout, not stuffy philosophy

Felix Wong

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Never mind that just five feet to my left, outside the window, snowflakes were swirling up from an icy sidewalk and pedestrians were wearing down jackets. Here I was dressed as if I were at a beach, just like the other shirtless guys and sports-bra-wearing women in the studio, dripping sweat onto the towel beneath me.

“Inhale,” guided Adam Armstrong, the instructor at the Bikram Yoga College of India in Old Town Fort Collins on this particular morning. “Now exhale.” Breathing was vital.



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I had come here to try Bikram yoga for the first time. While this style of yoga is distinctive for being practiced in sauna-like conditions—105 degrees Fahrenheit and 40 percent humidity is recommended—it is actually a specific sequence of 26 poses, performed twice, and two breathing exercises. The routine is copyrighted by Bikram Choudhury, its namesake. Every instructor—including Armstrong—has to undergo two months of rigorous training at a center in Hawaii and be certified by Choudhury himself.

Adam Armstrong strikes the "Triangle" pose.

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But why the heat? The high room temperature and humidity promotes sweating and helps the yogi release toxins from his body. More importantly, the muscles warm up quicker, allowing the body to go into a deeper pose with reduced risk of injury.

Good thing, I thought, because already by our fourth asana—or posture—we were twisting our arms, legs, and torsos in ways unmatched by any other activity short of professional contortionism.

“Somehow I don’t think bicycling or running had adequately prepared me for this,” I mused at one point.

I looked around the room to see how the pose being described by the instructor in great detail should look like. Yogis of all levels were represented here. There were two or three people who, despite their best efforts, appeared to be fighting their bodies (me, I’m sure), and some who were graceful most of the time and only had to be verbally corrected by Armstrong once or twice. Then there were Those Who Had Rubber Bands As Joints. Distant cousins of Gumby, perhaps.

I particularly admired a woman named Elizabeth a few feet to the side of me who not only was lithe and strong, but had the balance of a flamingo. As she stood on one leg while holding the other behind and above her head—perched like a droopy ‘Y’—I reflected upon how she could have easily been a tightrope walker in another life.

In contrast, I often found myself hopping around on one foot like a bunny. And so I thought about another source of inspiration. Kareem.

Yes, as in Abdul-Jabbar, the basketball great. He attributed his longevity (20 years in the NBA, once a record) to yoga, which he began doing in 1976. He practiced Bikram yoga regularly, and his son Amir even teaches it.

I would have been fooling myself if I had ever thought that just because Kareem could do it, I should have been able to do all 26 asanas with no problems on my first day. (I could never do an ambidextrous skyhook, either.) But since he had thought so highly of Bikram yoga, I figured it must have some tangible benefits.

Indeed, instructor Armstrong shared how his own problems with acid indigestion and back pain went away soon after he started practicing the asanas. Another student of the class, Ilan, claimed that Bikram yoga reduced his sleep requirements by two hours each night to just four or five hours.

“Yoga is not so much physical for me,” Ilan said, “but more mental, because I’m always thinking 1,000 mph. ... It helps me calm down mentally.”

Enhanced strength and flexibility are other benefits. So is feeling absolutely relaxed, as I experienced firsthand as I lay on a mat during the last 10 minutes of the 90-minute class, in complete silence except for the calming whirls of the overhead fans. Bikram’s philosophy is not only about feeling at peace, but being pain free.

“A lot of people who get into (yoga) get into it to heal themselves,” Armstrong said, later relating how the experience is almost addictive for him. “It’s like drugs, but it’s good for you.”

At least as good for the soul as being at a warm beach in December, I thought. I’m sure Kareem would agree.

Felix Wong is an avid outdoors enthusiast in Fort Collins. His personal blog is at felixwong.com and he can be reached at fcn@felixwong.com.

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