

Bikram Yoga

Yoga To The People, 38th & 6th

Thursday, November 4, 2011

90 minute class

Bikram Yoga is a system of yoga that Bikram Choudhury synthesized from traditional hatha yoga techniques and popularized beginning in the early 1970s. Bikram's classes run exactly 90 minutes and consist of a set series of 26 postures and 2 breathing exercises. Bikram Yoga is ideally practiced in a room heated to 105°F with a humidity of 40% and is the most popular form of hot yoga (a series of yoga poses done in a heated room)... the heated studio helps deeper stretching and injury prevention, while reducing stress and tension. Bikram claims that his system stimulates and restores health to every muscle, joint, and organ of the body... Bikram Yoga has been the subject of much debate as to whether or not performing strenuous exercise in a room over 100°C is safe.

I'm no stranger to practicing Yoga, having padded into a number of studios in Brooklyn on the heels of my wife over the years. At one point, I was going a couple times a week and while I would never represent that I was anything other than a mediocre practitioner (flexibility is not an inherent strong point of mine) the positive impact was tough to ignore – I was recovering from all my other activities quickly, and despite all the stupid stuff I was doing, avoided injury.

So when a good friend of mine, Ben, threw down the towel and said he was going to a Bikram Yoga studio once a week and really enjoying it and demanded I join him for a session, I agreed.

Now, I'm not great with heat. This is to be expected of Canadians. However, I am exactly the kind of nitwit that, in the middle of a heat wave, will run a lap of the park at noon to see what it's like.

Still, it was not without a tinge of anxiety that, having located the second floor studio on the corner of 6th and 38th, I noted a row of windows, opaque with condensation, and branded with the words "HOT YOGA" in giant, red, adhesive letters.

As I walked up the stairwell to the second floor, each step higher brought a discernable increase in temperature. Stepping into the anteroom of the studio brought yet another wave of heat, and I hurriedly shed my jacket and pants as every one of my body's internal sensors tripped.

My eyes adjusted to the dark to reveal a lithe, beautiful woman folded upon herself in some kind of intricate human origami at the studio entrance. Thanks to her serene composure I correctly assumed she was the instructor and introduced myself, telling her this would be my first Bikram class ever. I asked to get an extra towel, observing that "it's in both of our best interest".

I spread my mat out in the center of the room, my shirt already pasted to my chest with sweat, lay down, and waited for Ben as the room slowly filled with women.

Ben arrived and ambled into the room, wearing only his shorts.

I looked around nervously.

"Um, you're topless"

“Yes”, he replied “and sexy” while slowly rubbing his pasty, hairy, stomach. “If you wear your shirt, you are going to hate yourself – it gets too hot.”

“Too hot for a sleeveless, moisture-wicking, running jersey?”

“Yes.”

The definitive nature of the answer caused my anxiety to rise yet again, but I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it on the floor. In the mirror, I looked doubtfully at my pasty, hairy, stomach.

None of the women in the room took note.

“So” asked Nicky, our instructor, lightly moving through the crowd of women and smiling at the faces she recognized, “if this is your first time, go ahead and raise your hand.”

I raised my hand.

I was the only person in the room with a hand in the air.

The first 25 minutes of the class involved acclimation, breathing and balancing exercises.

The idea of “acclimating” to the heat was in many ways a cruel joke. Generally, humans don’t live in places with that kind of heat because it will kill them. It’s like suggesting to someone that they “acclimate” to breathing water.

Within minutes of moving through some simple breathing exercises and poses, every one of my pores dilated to the size of a nickel and sweat poured out.

Reaching over my head, I watched in the mirror as rivers of sweat poured down my face and neck, joined at the tributary of my chest, cascaded down my stomach and immediately drenched my shorts beyond the fabric’s ability to hold moisture so that every shift in position resulted in literal streams of water jettisoning from the hem.

My face was bright red.

Jesus.

The next 50 minutes or so were spent working through various standing yoga poses.

That is, the other people in the room did a series of standing yoga poses for the next 50 minutes while I clung, desperately, miserably, to the ragged edge of survival.

Early on in the series, as I moved forward from a warrior pose into a triangle pose and listened to the patter and tap of sweat leaping from my body to the mat, trying to concentrate on simply breathing, but each breath bringing a new and intolerable level of syrupy heat into my lungs, my vision began to narrow, slowly and languidly, until I found myself looking at a small, bright spot in the mirror.

Some deep memory from the back of my mind surfaced: *hey pal – it’s been a while but this is what happens just before you pass out...*

In slow motion, I lowered my body slowly to the mat, hands and feet both, and slowly turned onto my back and looked up at the ceiling hoping for some respite.

The tunnel that had been limiting my vision expanded and the crenellations of the old tin ceiling tiles came into focus.

But as I lay there breathing I realized, with no small amount of concern, that while I had worked my way back from the brink, I was not cooling down.

There was no respite.

The air was thick and searing, I felt as though I was pinned to the floor by some invisible, blistering, gelatinous mass and a very keen sense of claustrophobia overcame me.

I began a quiet, rational, negotiation with myself. My heart rate was fine, I was properly hydrated, I was breathing slowly and deeply, and I was going to stand and continue with the practice.

I stood, slowly.

I worked through another series of poses.

As I moved into a lunge, my vision started to narrow again.

And once again, I sank slowly and carefully to the floor and melted into a pool of sweat, misery, and panic, only to begin the painful auto negotiation process and convince my body to rise.

My sense of time evaporated and the world shrank to a viscous sphere bounded by my fingertips.

Ben was roughly twenty inches to my left but might have well been in Des Moines.

Nicky's voice became some ambient melody, and somehow mixed with the heat and light and every time I collapsed to the floor in slow motion pulled me, ultimately, back to my feet.

At some point, the class ended.

I registered this because I saw people leaving the room.

I could not move, and I could not speak. I turned my head to find Ben, and mouthed the word "help".

I made it to the anteroom, and the temperature dropped. I staggered, like a drunk, into the bathroom where there was a sink and a tile floor and the relative coolness of the tile was a quiet reminder that I was going to survive.

I put my head under the tap and poured cold water on my neck, and a wave of relief came over me, coupled with panic – as I cooled down my senses returned, in turn provoking my body to scream in alarm at what I had just done to it, and I very nearly fainted at the sink.

Still clad in only a soak pair of shorts, I slid to the floor and spread myself belly first on the cool tiles trying to find some way of shedding the heat that felt as though it had made its way, permanently, into my core.

At some point Ben came into the room, looking down at what I had become: a giant, agonized, delirious starfish.

“You OK?”

“Fine” I replied, pulling a small waste bin toward my face “but I am either going to vomit or faint, maybe both, and if I vomit before I faint, can you just make sure I haven’t fainted in my vomit?”

Ben processed this.

“How about I get you some Gatorade?”

I did not faint, nor did I vomit.

I drank a half a liter of coco water in about ten seconds, and Ben coaxed me off the floor of the bathroom and into the stairwell, itself another 20 degrees cooler.

Within a few minutes on the stairwell my body realized that this senseless torture had truly ended, and almost as though a switch was turned, I felt fine (if not parched and tremendously hungry).

I pulled on my clothes and the two of us walked into the embrace of the chilly night air.

Making my way to the subway, I felt almost euphoric.

I finished telling Val about the class between gulps of ice water and mouthfuls of a hastily constructed sandwich.

“So, it sounds like you hated it, you were in a substantial amount of pain and it nearly killed you. I take it you’re going to go again next Thursday then?”

Oh, the emotional kung-fu that woman has.

“Um, yes.”