

The unconventional yogi

By Jody Houton

Bikram Choudhury – the founder of Bikram Yoga – stretched into Phuket on 23 July to treat his students to a personal two-hour long session at the packed-out room in Bikram Hot Yoga Centre in Phuket.

Bikram Hot Yoga is a specific system of yoga, created by the visiting yogi himself, which incorporates 26 postures and two breathing exercises within a room that is artificially heated to 40 degrees.

The youthful looking Yogi has apparently been teaching people how to stretch, breathe and sweat for 52 years. His trainees over the years have included George Harrison, the Williams sisters and even Richard Nixon.

Through the numerous deep breathing and stretching exercises, Bikram Hot Yoga is said to stimulate and restore the strength and health of every muscle, joint and organ of the body. It is also said to promote a greater sense of relaxation, health and well-being.

Yogi Bikram gave an exclusive interview to the Post about his life, the celebs and stars he has taught, why religion is nonsense and why he won't talk about the relationship between the physical and spiritual to white people...

The Phuket Post (PP): What is Bikram yoga?

Do you want to live longer? How are you going to do that? In a wheelchair or in a mental institution? How are you going to live longer?

PP shrugs and glances at the ceiling.

Bikram Yoga makes you think longer and live longer and with dignity. On your 100th birthday, you'll be able to run around with your great grandkids and they'll have to tell you to slow down... That's Bikram yoga!

Although it only began becoming popular in the West in

the 70's, I have been teaching it for many years. George Harrison from The Beatles was one of my first Western students. He came to my studio in Beverly Hills in 1973.

PP: Why should people practise?

Many people come to me when they have a physical injury and I fix them, Quincy Jones and Andy Murray have all felt the benefits. (Perhaps Andy is a work in progress – Ed)

What's the best/most useful posture?

They're all important, you can't really answer that. What's the best part in a car? I think it's the brake, but if the engine is no good and the car won't start, then what good is the brake?

PP: Can everybody learn from Bikram yoga?

110 % everybody can learn from Bikram yoga! Just try it!

My guru taught me everything. He wrote me a 14 page note in 1966 that contained various predictions about my life that have come to pass. He told me to go around the world and continue spreading the message and that's what I have done.

PP: Do you meditate?

I don't sit in the lotus position because I don't have time, but my class is a sort of meditation or I wax my car and that's yoga!

PP: You mentioned earlier that you taught George Harrison; a man well-known for his elementary interest in Indian culture and its practices. In many ways he was iconic of the 60's and 70's hippy generation's desire to become more open to Eastern philosophies and practices. In these troubled times, do you think there more people that are turning to yoga and meditation and exploring their spirituality?

(Bikram contemplates the question for a good 30 seconds before answering) Americans make their money by cheating and by being dishonest... people are more educated than they were in the 60's, but now

it's all American culture, money, money, money. But that can bring only so much, there's so much corruption. I can give you a good, clean and pure life.

PP: Is there a connection between the spiritual and physical?

(Bikram becomes agitated and dismisses the question) I don't talk about such things with white people. There's no spirituality in the Western World. Let me ask you a question: How would you define spirituality?



PP attempts a flimsy definition

I asked the Pope the same thing in the 60's, nobody can answer that question. Religion has nothing to do with spirituality.

I use the body as a medium to the spirit, to bring the body, mind and spirit together.

Religion is the biggest pile of xxxx in the world. It discriminates and segregates and causes wars and huge problems. You are Christian and I am Indian, I am supposed to hate you because of the past and what religion forced your and my ancestors to do?



PP: What do you think about Phuket?

It's okay, I've spent a lot of time in Honolulu and it's kind of similar. You know the only thing important in a country? The people! Thai people are very good, but also very lazy!

India has more problems than the rest of the world, but Indian's are also happier than the rest of the people in the world. I find I get along with American people more than Indians though. They're more straight-forward and will tell you to xxxx off if they want to.

PP: A complaint often levied at Bikram Hot Yoga is that you encourage competition in your classes and your teaching style is very unique, (sort of like a cross between a horse race announcer and an American drill sergeant) was this how you were taught?

That's the way it should be with every yogi. It's the best way to learn! To push people. It's like giving a baby an injection, they may cry when they see the needle, but do it quickly and they will feel the benefit. It's necessary for us to compete against one another. But listen, (Bikram leans closer and touches me on the leg) You guys just have to follow me with this. Spirituality! If I want to learn how to build an airplane I'll come to you guys... but your life, your spirituality, your inner happiness you have to come to me. Trust me, I have saved half a million people; no-one has done that in the modern world.

PP: Thanks Bikram
No, thank you.

Yoga, meditation and breathing exercises have been an intrinsic aspect of Indian culture and religion for thousands of years. It is only relatively recently that Westerners have started buying beads, wearing baggy pants and dabbling in such Eastern matters.

In an attempt to test, validate and thus recognise these practices, the West frequently seeks to use psychology and science as a way to measure their usefulness. When it's found that the benefits cannot be scientifically monitored and measured, the value of the aforementioned practices are often dismissed.

But is this fair? After all, as Bikram says, why do we know?

Bikram Choudhury is indeed an interesting gentleman; he is clearly adored by his followers/students and exudes an inner strength and exuberant confidence that sometimes spills over into frustration during parts of his passionate diatribe.

His religious beliefs or non-beliefs, the way he peppers his speech with often course language and his obvious liking of material goods are all aspects that I, a white westerner, would not associate with a stereotypical yogi. But perhaps that is the point. After all what do I know?

As we departed, a bulky bandanna-wearing American came up with an out-stretched hand: "Man! You inspired me man!"

Bikram, obviously used to these types of exchanges responded instantly: "Good, how often do you practice?"

The American responded that as he was busy doing other things, he only had the time to do it once a month.

Although Bikram smiled and gave him his hand, he asked, "Why only once? You eat only once a month? You xxxx only once a month?" and as the American was withdrawing his hand and his eyes were glazing over, Bikram was becoming more buoyed and bounced into the arena to meet the group of predominantly Westerners to find out exactly how much his trainees knew and how much they were willing to learn.