

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



July 23, 2010

Posing as Fitness

By PANKAJ MISHRA

THE SUBTLE BODY

The Story of Yoga in America

By Stefanie Syman

390 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$27

THE GREAT OOM

The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America

By Robert Love

402 pp. Viking. \$27.95

A few years ago, the pop singer Sting confided to an interviewer that a specific [yoga](#) asana, or posture, had enabled him to have sexual intercourse with his wife, the star of a line of yoga videos, for as long as eight hours at a time. “Your stomach,” he said, “goes as near to the spine as you can make it, . . . and you never lose control, you just keep going.” The news of this priapic tour de force “went around the world,” in Sting’s own words, “like a forest fire.” Then he admitted he had been joking. His epic bouts of lovemaking, he said, included “four hours of begging, then a movie and then dinner.”

Sting probably didn’t realize how many would-be erotic athletes he had brutally disappointed by this confession. Even while the news of his sexual prowess was rumbling across countless magazine profiles, few people seemed to have suggested that eight hours of hydraulic exertion, however rapturous, might cause a slight problem of tedium, not to mention soreness. Nor did it provoke fundamental questions about the purpose of yoga, which in India, the country of its origin, is identified as one of the six main schools of classical philosophy as well as a form of intellectual training, ethical behavior, meditation, [alternative medicine](#) and physical culture. (The Sanskrit word itself means “union,” of the individual self with the cosmic Self.)

But then, as two new books on the strange history of yoga in America show, even the most esoteric and ancient spiritual tradition mutates weirdly when it meets a modern culture pursuing happiness with ever diverse means. As Pierre Bernard, one of the first of many indefatigable charlatans who popularized yoga, or at least its physical-training aspect, hatha yoga, in the United States, put it, “The purpose of yoga is to prepare us from getting cheated; to enable us to make better bargains, and to get what we go after!” Fabulous sex was high on Bernard’s menu even in the strait-laced 1910s. Robert Love’s entertaining

biography, “The Great Oom,” depicts a bold and successful liar who could tell his gullible disciples with a straight face that oral sex, punishable in 1915 by up to 20 years in prison, was a sacred practice in India and produced orgasms 10 times longer than ordinary intercourse.

Bernard, Love writes, “filtered the sacred literature of India . . . through his own point of view, that of an energetic Midwestern American.” Still, this conflation of yoga with the Kama Sutra — India’s most famous exports to the West prior to information technology — would have startled not only its Brahman practitioners in the Himalayas or along the Ganges but also the sages of Walden and Concord who first embraced Indian ideas of nondualism, the indivisibility of mind and matter, and the essential oneness of the universe.

Stefanie Syman’s more spacious history of yoga in America, “The Subtle Body,” begins by describing how deeply and enduringly classical Indian philosophy influenced American transcendentalists. Both Emerson and Thoreau admired the “Bhagavad-Gita”; Emerson’s Oversoul resembles the Brahman, the all-inclusive, all-pervading Self of the Upanishads. However, neither Emerson nor Thoreau knew much about the physical-fitness side of yoga. The earliest Indian vendors of spirituality, like Swami Vivekananda, who lectured on Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, looked down on the asanas, or poses, of hatha yoga as a defective path to yoga’s goal: the union of the individual self with the divine Self.

Not that Americans were eager from the start to assume en masse the shirshasana, or headstand pose. Syman may be right to assert that as “one of the first and most successful products of globalization,” yoga today has “augured a truly post-Christian, spiritually polyglot country.” But back in early-20th-century America, a nativist backlash against Asian immigrants resulted in xenophobic laws keeping Indians out. And, as Robert Love puts it in his account of Bernard’s struggles with various authorities, the “legion forces of conformity and puritanism occupied the highest reaches of government, law enforcement, the press, and the clergy.” “This Soul Destroying Poison of the East,” ran the headline of a long article in The Washington Post that blamed Bernard’s “Hindu occultism” for everything from marital infidelity to [suicide](#). Hounded by the yellow press and the police, Bernard scurried between various yoga centers for years before he found a congenial refuge near the Hudson River in Nyack, N.Y., in 1918.

So what changed? Preoccupied with rendering biographical detail (impressive but occasionally redundant in both books), Love and Syman rarely step back to give a broad overview of culture and society. The prospect for yoga brightened only with the arrival of a new generation for whom the “rock of ages” — “the sanctity of property, the patriarchal family, hereditary caste, the dogma of sin, obedience to authority,” as Walter Lippmann put it in 1914 — had been blasted away. Bernard also learned well the lesson of all successful purveyors of self-help from the Buddha to Bikram Choudhury, the controversial founder of today’s heavily marketed (and copyrighted) Bikram Yoga: target the very rich, who, as their shrewdest chronicler in the 1920s reminded us, are “different from you and me” because “they possess and enjoy early” and grow “soft” (while the rest of us flounder at an elemental stage of the human struggle).

[F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) wouldn’t have found it hard to understand why the beautiful and damned flocked to Bernard’s large estate, often eager to toil in the most menial tasks. Like Bikram of Beverly Hills, the owner of many Rolls-Royces and Rolexes, and whose client list includes Madonna and [Britney Spears](#), Bernard was especially lucky with his patrons, keeping one of the more flush Vanderbilts on tap for decades. Indra Devi, the semi-clad Swedish-Russian star of 1940s Bombay cinema (and the most intriguing of the colorful cast of eccentrics who brought yoga to America), seems barely to have bothered with the B-list. Arriving in Hollywood in 1947, Devi almost immediately enlisted Greta Garbo, Gloria Swanson and Jennifer Jones, along with others who, as Syman puts it, “were under constant pressure to look radiantly youthful.”

Soon, [Marilyn Monroe](#) was claiming that yoga improved her legs. Yehudi Menuhin wrote the foreword to Devi’s 1959 book “Yoga for Americans.” Yoga was quietly going mainstream. Syman slightly discounts the contributions of B. K. S. Iyengar, the author of “Light on Yoga” (1966), the most widely read book on modern yoga, and gives Devi credit “for ridding hatha yoga of sordid associations and accumulated ill will.” Indeed, she writes, “Indra Devi was so good at packaging hatha yoga as a defense against illness and aging” that it became “easy to lose sight of its real purpose — spiritual liberation.”

Meanwhile, fiercely entrepreneurial Indian gurus, previously limited by strict immigration laws, began to arrive in the United States, just in time for the counterculture. One of these bushy-bearded minor cultists even showed up at Woodstock in 1969, exhorting the crowd that “the time has come for America to help the whole world with the spirituality.” Many of these gurus were later

outed as lecherous frauds and crooks. But by then the secular therapeutic culture of America's liberal elites had begun to accommodate the less far-out aspects of Eastern religion and philosophy. As early as 1969, Syman writes, "yoga was something the hippies had in common with their putative enemies: the middle-class conformist, the corporate drone, the happy housewife." (And the adulterous one: yoga is seamlessly suburbanized in [John Updike's](#) Maple stories; and in "The Culture of Narcissism" (1979), Christopher Lasch grumpily lumps it together with oral sex as symptoms of Americans' weakening sense of self.)

Demoted to a mere workout, yoga in the 1980s lost some of its appeal to aggressive rivals in the fast-growing fitness business. Syman speculates that career-conscious women of the 1980s found aerobics more masculine, better able to help them break through the glass ceiling than presumably limp-wristed yoga. It was not until the late 1990s that yoga made a comeback, this time as a strenuous, calorie-immolating 90-minute workout. Bikram yoga (which takes place in rooms heated to 105 degrees), Ashtanga (pioneered by K. Pattabhi Jois) and Jivamukti (developed by two New Yorkers) demanded a grueling regimen that their upper- and middle-class adherents were only too relieved to surrender to. These new, quasi-masochistic movements, Syman writes, "had tapped directly into that deep, pulsing vein of American puritanism." But Syman can sound a bit puritanical herself as she berates her compatriots for ignoring the grand metaphysics of yoga and turning it into yet another prop for their isolated, hypercompetitive egos. "The Self, that God spark in everyone," she complains, has been demoted to the lowercase "self," forcing yoga to "surrender its claim to transcendence."

The image of incorrigibly individualist and materialist Americans rummaging through ancient cultures in search of eternal youth, beauty and self-gratification has long provoked scorn. "Yoga in Mayfair or Fifth Avenue," [Carl Jung](#) sternly declared, "is a spiritual fake." But such a fetish of the "authentic" assumes that people in the country of yoga's origin have upheld a timeless and unchanging yoga rather than practicing what Wendy Doniger, the distinguished historian of Hinduism, calls the world's greatest "have your rice cake and eat it" religion.

It was in India that the tradition of Tantrism first exalted the human body as the source of this-worldly liberation. The generation of semi-Westernized Indians who brought about the renaissance of yoga in the early 20th century were themselves syncretists, combining ideas from both East and West. Even

the physical aspects that dominate yoga today are partly reimports from the West. T. Krishnamacharya (the South Indian teacher of Indra Devi), B. K. S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois borrowed from gymnastic postures introduced to India by British colonialists.

Whether in the streets of Mysore or on Fifth Avenue, yoga cannot be disentangled from specific histories or specific cultural and economic practices. Of course, the more vulgar aspects of its inevitable commodification in the United States, like \$1,000-a-night yoga cruises, ought to be deplored. Certainly, the civic or political virtue that results from limber, yoga-toned bodies is not yet measurable. And it would be nice if American followers of yoga, who increasingly define the future of this Indian discipline, would at least occasionally seek something like spiritual transcendence, though, for some at any rate, prolonged lovemaking and deeper orgasms will remain more feasible than — and may even resemble — ecstatic oneness with the big Self.

Pankaj Mishra, a frequent contributor to the Book Review, is the author of “An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 8, 2010

A review on July 25 about two books on yoga misstated part of the title of another book on that subject, written by B. K. S. Iyengar and first published in 1966. It is “Light on Yoga,” not “Light of Yoga.”

*cited in Bikram's Yoga College v. Evolution Yoga, LLC
No. 13-55763 archived on November 17, 2015*