

FEATURES



BODY WORK

Bikram Choudhury wants to restore the chassis of the Western world

BY ERIKA SCHICKEL

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Sitting behind the wheel of his white Bentley in a white leather baseball cap, white slacks and a sweater trimmed with racing stripes, the fully dressed Bikram Choudhury seems smaller than he does in the tiny black panty he wears on the "throne" from which he teaches his particular brand of yoga. In a room heated to 105 degrees, a Madonna mike strapped to his head, Bikram commands a room of 200 people through the 26 postures he developed to systematically work the body, "from bones to skin, from hair to toes." He is the imperious Master of Hot Yoga, revered by many, misunderstood by more, and despised by some for his

competitive approach to what Westerners regard as a spiritual practice. But behind the wheel of this massive car, his long hair flowing past his shoulders, yoga's bad boy seems more like a boisterous little kid out for a joy ride in his daddy's car.

We hang a left on Venice, and Bikram cranks the music. A deafening techno-pop thud fills the air. "I love it!" he shouts over the music. "Robert Miles, 'Children.' The best. Absolutely number one. No question." He listens rapturously for a few more beats, then turns back to one of his favorite subjects: cars.

"When I was a baby," Bikram attests, "I used to stand on street corner in front of our home yelling 'Ford Fairfax! Hillman Hunter! Hudson! Plymouth! DeSoto! Packard!'" He lays on the gas and the Bentley surges forward, our bodies pressed back into impossibly soft leather. We are doing 70 on Venice Boulevard in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon.

"Every human being in this world is interested in certain things," Bikram reflects as he waits for the light to change. "Everybody has a hobby. Some people like art; I know nothing about it. Some people like books, some people like fishing, some people like music. I like to look at cars."

Bikram pulls into one of the many unremarkable, frayed little garages that dot La Brea Avenue and glides the Bentley to a stop. We have arrived at the locus of his lifelong hobby, Bikram's Garage, where his cars line up in sundry states of disrepair; some of them have been restored from rusted hulks. He prefers cars with a celebrity pedigree: Clark Gable's Roadster, the Beatles' Moreno sports car. "My specialty is collecting cars that were made for special people for special reasons." He explains further: "From my childhood I have one kind of personality. Whatever I do, I am the only one. Whatever I should have, that's the only one in the world. My guru says, 'Bikram second to none.'"

He has called ahead and instructed one of his mechanics to uncover the cars. Automobiles of varying vintages sit fender to fender, like students in his studio, waiting for his attention. He leads me over to the shell of a 1956 Rolls that has been gutted and stripped of paint. "You know Gypsy Rose Lee? Famous stripper? Number one? This is her car." He caresses the voluptuous swell of metal surrounding a headlight. "Just feel it here. It is all aluminum. No steel. See inside?" He points to a puckered bumpy corner. "Somebody cheated. They put Bondo inside. But when I finish, no more Bondo."

In another part of the garage, a shiny Rolls-Royce stretches out like a big cat in the sun. "This Rolls is only one in the world. I created this." It is a 1960 Cloude 9. He has cut the top off and made it into the world's only four-door convertible.

"This is the electric top. This goes *shhhup!* This my regular car. When I drive it," Bikram boasts, "people get nuts in the road."

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When Bikram Choudhury was 5 years old, his family moved to Calcutta, where they lived next door to Gosh's College of Physical Education. One day little Bikram wandered over. "There were kids there, working out with weights and doing yoga. I took my shirt off and started doing it. This man said, 'Hey, come here. Show me.'" The man was Gosh. "So I started showing him yoga. He said, 'Come every day. I teach you yoga.' So I did it for 20 years." Bishnu Gosh was the brother of Paramahansa Yogananda, who founded the Self-Realization Fellowship and wrote *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Gosh became Bikram's guru.

Bikram thrived under Gosh's tutelage, becoming the youngest person ever to win the National India Yoga Competition, at the tender age of 11, and going on to win the following two years. At 14 he started weightlifting and also competed successfully in that field until age 17, when a spotter dropped an 80-pound weight on his knee, crushing it. "You can fuck with the gods," Bikram says, "but don't fuck with the knees."

Effectively a cripple, Bikram was told by Western-trained doctors that he would never walk again. Gosh brought him back to the college. Inside of eight months, Gosh had Bikram performing the lotus, yoga's trademark cross-legged sitting position, which, done wrong, could put extreme strain on the knees. "That's why I become a yoga teacher," Bikram says now. "To fix the knees. From the knee I fix body, then the mind, then the life."

Gosh taught traditional hatha yoga, picking specific asanas for specific ailments. "But I changed it a little," explains Bikram. "From 84 postures, or 550 variations of the postures, I picked out 26 postures like antibiotic, and I put it in a sequence, like a song." The routine begins and ends with breathing exercise, and each posture is done twice and separated by *savasana*, or corpse pose. The complete sequence takes 90 minutes. The heated room is meant to mimic the heat of India, where yoga was developed and bodies stretch more deeply. But the real underlying principle is simple mechanics. "You cannot bend steel without first heating it up," Bikram often tells his students. In other words, if you want to change the shape of your chassis, you need a good blowtorch. Stretching lubes your joints. Sweating flushes out your radiator and your crankcase. *Pranayama* breathing re-inflates your tires, while *Kapalbhati* breathing is like draining your oil pan. During his class, "You use more percentage of your body. Your heart works better, your lungs work better, spine better, digestive system better, every joint better, skeleton system better, all the ligaments, tendons, nerves, veins, tissues, brain cells, all cells, everything you are. Like a car, it is complete full service."

The 26-posture sequence was controversial from the start. "As a beginner my guru disagreed with me," Bikram recalls. "He said, 'You cannot prescribe same thing for everybody.'" But Bikram's faith in the universal human tune-up could not be shaken. He eventually convinced Gosh, who then sent him out into the world as a *yagacharya* and gave Bikram his life's mission: "Save the world, spread out the name of yoga. Complete my incomplete job."

First Bikram went to teach in Bombay, where many of his students were. "Movie stars, rich people — oh, they have so many beautiful cars!" He persuaded a wealthy student to buy a Bombay garage, and began directing sales and repairs. People were impressed with Bikram's broad range of car knowledge, which he had picked up solely from reading auto magazines. "I would drive Mercedes in the morning, Chrysler Imperial in the evening. I live like a king in Bombay."

A year later, Gosh sent Bikram to Japan, where he met his "Japanese Mother," a woman whose life he saved through yoga. Married to an auto and hotel magnate, with no son of her own, this woman effectively adopted Bikram, bringing him into her family's multibillion-dollar business. "She is the richest living human being on the Earth. She can buy 10 buildings in one check." Bikram stayed for three years, spreading the word of hatha, flying in a private 747 and coming dangerously close to an arranged marriage with her business partner's daughter. "But I don't want to marry yet. I want to teach yoga."

"Tell me something," Yogi Raj Bikram asks his Saturday-morning class, "what is the meaning of 99 percent right?"

"One hundred percent wrong!" his students all answer back, their voices taut with the effort of holding their balancing stick poses. Bikram is sitting cross-legged on his white leather chair overlooking a sea of locked, pointed, dripping bodies.

"One hundred percent wrong! You didn't do nothing yet. You didn't get one dime benefit from 10 dollars this morning. This is only place in the world you hear the truth. Everybody lie to you your whole life. Your father, your mother, your schoolteacher, your friends. When you look ugly, they say you look pretty. Arms over head! Give me a good one!"

Bikram insists his hard-assed dialogue is part of his altruistic mission to make people push themselves and discover their true potential. "I make people see how good they are," he says. Then, seeming to contradict himself as he so often does, "Negative attitude is nine times more powerful than positive attitude." You might think he means by this that he can improve people if he criticizes them. But what he intends to say is that people focus more

often on the negative in themselves. He wants them to see the good — but they have to suffer first.

There are many who see the negative in Bikram. He gets other yogis riled up over what they perceive to be his arrogance and self-promotion. When he called all other yoga teachers “circus clowns” in a *Yoga Journal* interview, he even managed to piss off the co-owner of City Yoga, Anthony Benenati. “I want to honor Bikram, whether or not I agree with him,” says Benenati, who teaches a variety of yoga called *Anusara*. “He is committed to his beliefs, and I respect that. But he hasn’t respected other people’s beliefs. It’s not a competition.”

But in fact, where Bikram comes from, yoga is a competition. Americans tend to look at yoga as a blissfully ego-free physical realm, but in India, yoga has long been regarded as a competitive sport. The government supports the promotion of yoga contests in universities, and many of the ashrams hold competitions. The Indian Yoga Competition (which Bikram and his wife, Rajashree, have each won three times) draws tens of thousands of spectators every year. At the end of this month (September 25–28), Bikram will host the first Yoga Expo, held at the Los Angeles Convention Center, in honor of Gosh’s 100th birthday. Along with seminars, workshops and exhibitors, there will also be the four-day finals of the first World Yoga Championships. The official committee of the Indian Yoga Competition will judge the finalists. By promoting competition in yoga, Bikram argues that he is only honoring his Hindu tradition, as well as following the great sage Patanjali, the founder and father of yoga, who wrote the *Yoga Sutras* around 300 B.C.E.

The particulars of Bikram’s spirituality are hard to pin down. He says he was raised in an Indian tradition that translates roughly as “the discipline of human life.” “We don’t talk about humanity,” he says. “We just perform it. Never lie, never cheat, never hurt anybody’s feelings. That’s called spiritualism.” Bikram does not claim to be a spiritual guru. His focus is building a solid physical foundation for a spiritual life.

Bikram tells a story about Pope Paul VI coming to India. “He asked Mr. Nehru, my student Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s father, ‘Is yoga religion?’ So he [Nehru] called me. He said, ‘Will you explain to him what is yoga?’ So I spend 10 days with the pope. I brainwash him. Didn’t help.”

“Religion,” Bikram has said, “is the biggest shit in the world. I believe in people.”

Bikram collects people in much the same way he collects cars. They must be one of a kind, top shelf, “absolutely the best, no question.” He counts Candice Bergen among his friends, and Quincy Jones. But he also makes room for Jim Schaeffer, the guy out in Big Bear who does all the woodwork for his dashboards. This is part of what makes Bikram so magnetic; when his focus is on you, you feel like a Silver Cloud Rolls-Royce. The people in his world, from his family and friends, to the people who study with him, work with him, park his cars, are all passionate and fiercely protective of him. “I touch their soft corner,” he explains. “In that way American people are very open-minded.”

Among Bikram’s dazzling collection of celebrity friends once was Elvis Presley, who called him to come to Las Vegas in December of 1976, where Presley was performing. Bikram found The King at the International Hilton, in an “ice-cold suite, sweating like a shower. Elvis said, ‘Bikram, I don’t want to die.’ He give me a check for \$100,000. He says, ‘Come to my home, teach me yoga.’ I said, ‘I can’t. Seven o’clock in the morning I have a class and no assistant.’” Bikram went back to L.A. Six months later, Elvis was dead. “He swallowed 24,000 pills. For no reason. His only problem in life is being Elvis Presley. Being a star is what kills him.”

Bikram has been dedicated to saving the lives of celebrities ever since.

“All the doctors, all the marriage consultants, all the psychiatrists together couldn’t do what I did alone in this town for 30 years. It is living proof. I save Hollywood. Show-business people are still working today because of me.” Bikram intends to “civilize the West” with yoga. He claims that doing his yoga strengthens the will, confidence and self-esteem, and will eventually banish all negativity from the Western psyche.

In keeping with his goal of saving the world, Bikram’s L.A. headquarters on South La Cienega Boulevard is home to a massive teacher-training school, which mints between 200 and 300 new instructors per nine-week session. These teachers have so far opened over 600 schools across America and hundreds more internationally. He is in the process of franchising his sequence so that only teachers he personally has trained can teach Bikram Yoga, another move that has done nothing to endear him to the yoga community at large.

“Yoga is not hamburgers,” said Trisha Lamb Feuerstein of the Yoga Research and Education Center in Santa Rosa to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Franchising a spiritual discipline is “non-yogic.” Much of the controversy is over the misapprehension that Bikram is franchising yoga asanas; he answers that he seeks only to patent his sequence and his use of heat. He wants the quality control a franchise operation allows. Many teachers have cranked up the heat in their studios and called their practice Bikram Yoga. But according to Emmy Cleaves, his friend and partner of 30 years, “If you changed some of the ingredients in penicillin, it

would no longer be penicillin, right? It's a very profound physiological reaction that it creates. These postures are the language of the body. How you put it together creates the meaning. He absolutely should copyright it. It is his intellectual property."

But if the "McYoga" analogy misses the mark, there might be a more accurate franchise comparison: Instead of the McDonald's of yoga, Bikram may be the Jiffy Lube: He wants to see a world where every human being can get a complete tune-up in under 90 minutes.

There once was a time when Bikram worked on his cars himself. That was back when he had his yoga studio in the basement of a bank building and he asked only for donations from his students. That was before his friend Shirley MacLaine told him if he didn't charge for classes, nobody would want to take them. Now, 30 years later, he charges \$20 a class and employs five full- and part-time mechanics at his garage.

In fact, the only manual labor Bikram does regularly on the cars is waxing, a job he relishes so much he often waxes the same car again and again. "When I wax the car, I meditate," Bikram explains. "Last weekend my back was killing me. I didn't do yoga for a long time, and I came from New York — so cold — and sat on the plane for five hours. The best thing when I got home was to go and wax the car.

"Look at this car. *Look at this car!*" Bikram says excitedly. He lays his small hands on the body of a 1964 Bentley painted a deep, rich purple. "Look at that paint. This is called 'Queens' Black Cherry' color. It took two and one-half years to paint it. Feel it here." He guides my hand along the door. "We call it 'baby ass.'" I have felt my fair share of baby asses, and none were as smooth as this. Bikram's pleasure is palpable. "This car goes to show — I guarantee you — I'll bring first prize. And I drive it! Everybody who shows a car, they keep it in the showroom, they never drive. But I drive!"

If Bikram doesn't end up using a car, he will give it to charity. He insists he never makes any money on his hobby. In the next breath, he also brags that when he restores a car, its price triples.

On the subject of his own wealth, Bikram is enigmatic. One minute he will proclaim, "I don't chase money, money chase me!" But when pressed to give a clearer picture of his holdings, all he will say is, "I am not that rich. I am okay." Measured against the resources of the company he keeps — superstars, land barons and Japanese auto magnates — this may indeed be true. But he clearly makes a lot of money, and perhaps it is this, more than anything, that makes people suspect his motives: We have, in America, a long tradition of gurus gone bad with wealth. We all want money ourselves, but we prefer that our gurus remain poor.

Bikram leads me over to an antique Mercedes, and his voice falls to a reverent hush. "This is only one in the world. Million-dollar car. 770 K Grosser made 18 of them for Hitler. This one Hitler presented 1936 — India's Maharajah of Indoor's wedding gift." A chill runs through me as I contemplate this prize, a one-of-a-kind car made for a genocidal maniac. When Bikram found the car in India 50 years after the wedding, it was half sunk into the ground. Where most would have turned away in disgust from this wreck, Bikram saw the good in it. He dug it up and brought it back to America.

"Never too late, never too old, never too bad, never too sick to start from scratch," Bikram is fond of saying.

He looks at the car he has made whole and beautiful again, ready for a new life. An excited grin illuminates his face. "Really, I have no profession. Health culture is my hobby. Cars are my hobby. I love people, I love myself, I love my body, so I fix human body. I love cars; I fix cars."

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