

MIND/BODY



Bikram Yoga

Healing, rejuvenation and detoxification: the claims behind Bikram yoga are as colourful as its founder's personal story. Tony Lycholot clears away the steam to locate the science behind the asanas.

What is it?

Bikram yoga is well defined on the UK website (www.bikramyoga.co.uk). Here, a Bikram yoga class is described as "a 26 posture classical Hatha yoga series. Every posture is performed in the given order, to the best of one's ability. Students of all levels practise together. One learns to work as deeply as one's flexibility allows." Significantly, 'The Bikram Method' takes place in a heated room (105° Fahrenheit/40° Celsius and around 40% humidity). It is claimed that this is in order to "ease muscles and joints, prevent injury and aid the healing of existing injuries, as well as promoting detoxification through sweating". Classes are 90 minutes long.

Where did the name come from?

Bikram is the first name of Bikram Choudhury, who apparently began studying yoga at the age of four and who, by age 12, was the youngest ever national yoga champion of India. His is a great story: apparently, while pursuing an

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athletic career as both a marathon runner and champion weightlifter, setting world records and competing in Olympic-style weightlifting, a weightlifting accident 'crushed' his knees, severely crippling him. Told by doctors he would never walk again, he had himself carried to his yoga guru (Bishnu Ghosh) where he created his yoga series with the aid of Ghosh and remarkably restored himself to full health.

Having set up a yoga studio in Hollywood in 1971 and becoming the personal teacher to numerous celebrities, Bikram Choudhury has now achieved

celebrity status himself. In an interview published in *The Sunday Times* newspaper in 2009,¹ his estimated wealth was suggested to be \$7m (according to *The Wall Street Journal*), although Choudhury himself, according to *The Sunday Times*, has previously admitted to earning "\$10m a month".

It would appear that Choudhury obtained copyright for his method in 2003 by registering his sequence of 26 asanas and two breathing postures, and also patenting his 90-minute method dialogue in 2002 (he vigorously pursues infringements of copyright). There are an estimated 600 Bikram yoga studios worldwide and, in order to teach Bikram yoga, you must be a certified Bikram instructor. Classes tend to be expensive, with group classes in London being approximately £14.50 (drop-in rate; concessions and group booking discounts available) and one-on-one private sessions with senior instructors costing £100-£175 (+ VAT).

Why the controversy?

Some of the controversy regarding Bikram yoga is focused upon the issue of whether it is 'right' to be able to copyright yoga poses that are literally thousands of years old. Choudhury's argument appears to be that he has created something unique in the way he has researched and packaged the poses, class and dialogue, and it is this that is copyrighted and operated effectively as a franchise.

This – along with his lawsuits – has upset traditional practitioners of yoga, both in America (where the majority of Bikram yoga studios are to be found) and also in India, where even the Government, as reported on BBC's Radio 4 programme² appears concerned at the overt commercialisation of a 'philosophy and way of life'. To circumvent copyright infringement, some studios that also practise Hatha yoga poses in the heat advertise these classes as 'hot yoga'.

In published interviews, Choudhury comes across as 'extravagant' and he is arguably guilty of either embellishment or forgetfulness. In the Radio 4 programme, Choudhury talked, among other things, of introducing the Beatles to yoga in 1959; this is one year before they were formed. He also claimed to be working with NASA, although Radio 4 reporters noted that "NASA could find no trace of a research programme into yoga for astronauts".

The claims for the many and often remarkable health benefits of regularly and religiously carrying out Bikram yoga classes are almost limitless; at least according to the Bikram websites. All of these claims appear to be anecdotal, since there is no reference to published research to support them. Anyone with a basic understanding of exercise physiology, clinical and/or sports medicine will probably fail to be convinced by these claims in the absence of real medical evidence and more robust clinical reasoning.

Where's the science?

Other than the anecdotal and testimonial, there appears to be little in the way of published, peer-reviewed research data to directly endorse this method of yoga.

However, discussing the general practice of yoga in a recent review article, Lee Lipton³ comments that "although yoga has been practised for centuries, most of the theory behind the practice has not been systematically studied using the rigorous tools of modern medical science." However, Lipton acknowledges and references a number of well carried out research studies supportive of the practice of yoga to improve *certain symptoms* of back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome and osteoarthritis. In addition, Lipton notes that yoga can improve balance, muscular strength



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and endurance, with positive “carryover effects” to activities of daily living and sports participation.

Other less stringent research reviewed by Lipton showed promising scientific evidence for the management of attention deficit disorder/hyperactivity, anxiety, depression and menopausal symptoms.

In terms of cardiovascular fitness, “the general consensus is that a typical Hatha yoga practice does not provide the stimulus necessary to enhance cardiovascular endurance,” says Lipton, although “more vigorous forms of yoga that require a higher energy output could hold more promise.”

In a study by the American Council on Exercise in 2005 looking at exercise intensity,⁴ researchers found that a 50-minute session of Hatha yoga resulted in an average energy expenditure of 144kcal (equivalent to a slow walk) and provided no significant benefit. Higher-intensity ‘power’ yoga resulted in an average energy expenditure of 237kcal, leading the researchers to conclude that “it’s a great muscular workout and you certainly sweat, but it’s not an aerobic workout.”

Power yoga is a great muscular workout and you certainly sweat, but it’s not an aerobic workout.

According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, NCCAM,⁵ “research suggests that yoga might

- Improve mood and sense of well-being
- Counteract stress
- Reduce heart rate and blood pressure
- Increase lung capacity
- Improve muscle relaxation and body composition
- Help with conditions such as anxiety, depression and insomnia
- Improve overall physical fitness, strength and flexibility
- Positively affect levels of certain brain or blood chemicals

“However, well-designed studies are needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn about yoga’s use for specific health conditions.”

Are there safety issues?

Generally, yoga is considered to be safe in normal, healthy individuals when practised appropriately. However, the NCCAM cautions that “people with certain medical conditions should not use some yoga practices.

For example, people with disc disease of the spine, extremely high or low blood pressure, glaucoma, retinal detachment, fragile or atherosclerotic arteries, a risk of blood clots, ear problems, severe osteoporosis or cervical spondylitis should avoid some inverted poses.” And what of Bikram yoga specifically? Well, the heat and humidity may well pose a problem for some individuals, particularly if they are not acclimatised, not

well hydrated to begin with and do not continue to hydrate appropriately throughout the class; points that are certainly made on the UK website. In other sports and activities, well-researched and documented guidelines exist for training or competition in the heat and at 40°C and 40% humidity. Typically, under such conditions, the comment is that “heat cramps or heat exhaustion are likely, with heat stroke possible”.⁶ Finally, critical thinking fitness professionals may like to run the UK website address through The Quackometer (www.quackometer.net). **fp**

To view the references, visit www.fitpro.com/references

