

Hot Yoga or How to Self-Administer Your Own Stroke

I am a jaded, jaded man. I have lived long enough with this body of mine to know it will never look the way I want it to look. I always wished it to have very little extra cushioning, and be overloaded with hardness in my arms, legs, shoulders, chest, and torso. But as I have aged, I have lowered the bar on my wants and desires for this temple I call a body. At this point, I would be happy to see my feet when I look down toward them, and I know I have a tattoo somewhere on the front of my hip. I was in my 20's when I got it, and I would like to see it once again before I go to the great workout center in the sky. I don't think that's too much to ask.

I know myself well enough to know, unless a gym is offering all-you-can-eat chicken wings every day, there is no way I will visit it daily. I am extremely lazy and impatient, and looking for a work-out to help me lose my excess weight and get me toned quickly and without a lot of effort. So when a couple of my friends started telling me about this great new workout they had discovered, I was intrigued. "Tell me more," I eagerly gushed.

"Hot yoga is the best thing ever," my friend Susan said. "It doesn't strain your muscles too much, and you burn *thousands* of calories in just one hour."

"Thousands, you say?" I said.

"I feel so relaxed and refreshed after hot yoga. I can't believe I actually lost fifteen pounds in two weeks by simply doing it. I didn't change my eating or drinking habits or anything," gushed Donna, another friend.

"No change in your drinking habits, you say?" My interest was piqued.

These glowing recommendations were all I needed to lose whatever inhibitions my normally grouchy self would impose on a new workout, and head out to the closest Bikram yoga

studio. Once there, though, what I discovered was far from a glorified new way to lose weight. What I discovered was the Devil himself has decided to tap into the multi-million dollar fitness industry with his own special workout. Or perhaps, one of those “scared straight” evangelical preachers is behind it, giving people a little taste of what the third ring of Hell will feel like if they don’t change their ways.

For those of you who are fortunate enough to have never been to a Bikram Yoga class, let me explain to you what it is. Bikram Yoga is a supposed beginner’s level yoga class with 26 stances—or more aptly, pretzel shapes—conducted in bright, fluorescent lighting, at a recommended temperature of one hundred five degrees. That’s right, one hundred five. Degrees. Fahrenheit. 1-0-5.

I fell for my friends’ lies, tricks, and ploys hook, line, and sinker. I actually believed them when they said it would not be bad and I would feel great afterwards. I believed them when they told me it would balance my chi, and I would live in harmony with the Universe. More importantly, I believed them when they told me it would result in my having a smoking hot body. I even consulted with my friend Jeff, a workout fanatic. He had read all the propaganda about the healthy results of Bikram Yoga, and was more than ready to give it a go with me.

The day of our first yoga class, I starting preparing as soon as I woke up. I drank water incessantly, and I ate proper amounts of protein and carbs at the exact times recommended on the Bikram studio’s website. 6:00 pm was class time. I met Jeff outside the facility and went to the counter to sign up for the miracle class.

Making sure she first had collected our money, the too-skinny lady at the counter told us some very important rules for the class:

1. No talking inside the actual studio where the yoga will take place.

2. If you cannot do a stance, just stand straight with your arms at your side.
3. If you need to sit down, lay down completely on your back, arms at your side, on your mat.
4. Only drink your water when the instructor says you may have some.
5. You are not allowed to leave the room during the class, which is ninety minutes.

Apparently, these rules are somewhat sacred. In fact, she was so serious and intense giving us the lowdown, I fully expected her to end with, "And the most important rule is do not talk about Bikram yoga," a la Fight Club style.

Jeff went ahead of me into the ~~fire~~ studio to find us two spots while I went to the locker room and changed into my workout clothes. After changing, I confidently opened the door to the studio. What hit me next was a wall of heat that can only be explained by preheating your oven to five hundred degrees and sticking your head inside it. The temperature completely took my breath away. I barely could see. As I tried not to audibly gasp for air, I finally found Jeff who was already on his mat looking dazed and confused. Although he only had been in the room five minutes longer, his shirt was already visibly soaking wet. I unfurled my yoga mat beside his, and sat down. Because it was against the rules, we both had an overwhelming urge to talk. Finally giving in, Jeff whispered, "Psst, it sure is hot in here."

"Let's get the Hell out of here," I replied in a voice way above a whisper.

At that moment, the instructor entered the room, and locked the door behind her. She smiled, and began the class. I smiled back and the nightmare commenced. The very first thing we did was a full body stretch with our hands raised all the way over our heads. Immediately, the wall of mirrors the class was facing showed me I had worn a t-shirt much too short for Bikram yoga. My big, extremely white belly suddenly was on display for all to see as my shirt rose up to

the level of a halter top. I altered my stretch to minimize the belly flash, just as the teacher told us now to stretch down to our toes. It didn't take a wall of mirrors to tell me that not only was my shirt not long enough, but also my shorts were ill-fitting. Let's just say if there were a "Plumbers Stance" in yoga, I would have perfectly achieved the position.

I tried to keep up with the different stances and not be self-conscious of how I looked doing them. This became much easier to do as the 105-degree heat and the bright, fluorescent lights and the annoying teacher's voice all kept smashing into me. My last conscious sight was Jeff on his back with his leg in a position that unless you have been mangled in a car wreck or a skiing accident should never, ever be in. He mouthed to me, "I'm sorry. We shouldn't have come."

Then, what I call Bikram Tourette's Syndrome took over my body. I think it was my body's only way of getting through this trauma. I started occasionally yelling out random curse words as I tried to twist and contort my body in ways just not possible. I giggled while illegally grabbing my water. I jumped on one foot while trying to do some "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" stance. I think I ended just trying to hold the classic position Ralph Machio made famous in the movie Karate Kid when he continued to fight even with a busted ankle. I can't really tell you because I have no real memory of anything other than the heat.

For 90 minutes, I flashed my belly and butt crack to anyone willing to look at it while sweating more than I thought was ever possible. I cussed, prayed, and giggled my way to the end. After the session, Jeff and I sat in the locker room on the cold tile floor. I wanted to cry, and he wanted to throw up. We eventually gathered ourselves, showered and met back outside. I noticed that my left eye seemed to be drooping, and I did not feel better. I didn't feel great or

relaxed, and I was pretty sure my chi wasn't up to par either. I began googling “symptoms of stroke” on my phone.

On our way out, the too-skinny perky counter girl informed us that this was a common reaction after the first visit, and that it was, in her exact words, “like 100% totally different,” after the second class. It would be incredible. In fact, she had taken the class every day for 30 days and felt like a new woman! Words can't describe what I wanted to do to that perky girl. But instead, I foolishly listened to her. If she said it was 100% different on Day 2, then who I am to argue with that? She was the expert. Jeff and I decided we would rest one day, then come back for the amazing yoga high promised us after completing Class 2. In happy denial, I drove home, only barely having to hold my drooping left eye open with my hand, more excited for the day off than I was for the next class.

It is said under a lot of trauma your brain actually will shut down to block the memory of the extreme peril it has been placed in. For example, my best friend was hit by a car when we were children, and she doesn't remember a thing about it. She just remembers waking up in a full body cast two days later at the Mary Breckenridge Hospital. Likewise, two days later I had no recollection of what happened to me during my first Bikram yoga class. For some reason, I did not recall yelling curse words or spurting out loud bursts of laughter at inappropriate times or showing my butt crack and fat belly to everyone in my Bikram yoga class. For reasons still unknown to me, I woke up two days later and immediately started drinking water, knowing that I would soon be achieving my promised "yoga high."

I chatted with Jeff mid-morning, and he was a bit reluctant, but willing to try it again. I even went so far as to convince another friend, Anne, to join us for the class. I am ashamed to say I told poor, sweet Anne it really wasn't that bad. I think I may have even told her I actually

knew someone who had done it for 30 straight days—cue the too-skinny counter girl. What was I thinking? I don't know. That's the beauty and mystery of the mind, and also how cults cultivate new members.

During my lunch break at work, I rushed to Target to buy an all-new yoga outfit. I would be ready this time. I knew what to expect. I knew I needed to shop for a really long shirt and loose shorts that would soak up sweat like a sponge. While there, I bought a matching yoga mat. There was no need not to match, even in 105-degree heat. I was out of shape, not a barbarian.

Class time finally rolled around, and I was ready. Jeff was looking a little wary at the thought of going back into the inferno, mumbling something about his equilibrium not being right since the other day. I shielded Anne from Jeff's negativity, and we headed into the room.

As soon as we walked into the studio, I remembered it was the pit of Hades. All the horrid memories of the first class came rushing back. "Ah, Hell," was the only thing I could think.

I decided it best not to make eye contact with Anne. She was looking betrayed and frightened. And hot. Not hot in a good way, but hot as midday August in a Florida parking lot. Anne is a former dancer and in decent shape, but maybe I had oversold this to her. With the "click" of the door being locked, the fluorescent lights came glaring on, and the teacher started her slow torture.

About 20 minutes into the class, I still had not correctly achieved one single stance. Jeff was visibly struggling. Apparently, he had not been kidding about his equilibrium being off because he was swaying like a drunk man, and I think I saw a little drool coming out his mouth. Anne, on the other hand, looked comfortable. She had more or less passed out about 10 minutes into class and was lying flat on her back with her arms at her side on her mat.

My Bikram Tourette's Syndrome kicked in at about the 45-minute stage of class. I was tired of trying this crap, and didn't care anymore. I started my cussing and hopping around trying to hold a stance, and my head was hurting. Our teacher at some point had decided that Jeff's name was John, and she was actually calling him out to the class. "Keep up, John," she said, and, "No, no, your other left arm, John." Jeff was so out of it, he responded to being called John and tried in vain to do better. Anne was still comfortably lying on her mat. I could see her chest rising and falling so I knew she was still alive.

With only 15 minutes left in class, "John" had taken as much as he could stand. In a moment of clarity I hadn't seen out of him since we entered the room on the first night, he gathered his things and starting staggering for the door. I wanted to yell, "John, it is locked! Stop! You'll spoil everyone's chi!" Not that my own behavior had not already ruined the class. John/Jeff stopped just short of the door and plopped down in a fetal position. Anne was still comfortable on her mat, dreaming away.

At the end of the class we woke Anne, and I helped Jeff back to the locker room. We had made it, but where the heck was my yoga high? I felt like I had been hit by a bus. While getting ready to leave, I looked in the mirror, and confirmed it. My left eye was drooping, again. Even more tonight than the previous class. I was pretty sure I had suffered a stroke.

The three of us sat outside in the cool evening air for a bit after we changed our clothes. Anne was fresh as a daisy, feeling great, and said her skin felt remarkably smooth from her sauna nap. Jeff had a worn, beaten-down look to him. I looked like a person who had just suffered a stroke.

Jeff immediately said he had to work late the rest of the week and all of next week, and therefore not available for class at all. Anne wondered if she would ever get to sleep that night

because of her 90-minute nap. I worried my drooped eye would not bounce back and I would look abnormal for the rest of my life. In the end, we three decided each to go our own way and, just like the Fight Club, never speak of this incident again.