For millennia, the intricate techniques of yoga were passed down from teacher to student in a sacred exchange. But today, in the booming yoga industry, it's (downward-facing) dog-eat-dog. **BY PAUL KEEGAN**
You can't take it anymore. The greed, corruption, and selfishness of the business world have broken your spirit. You need inner peace. Everyone's walking around with a yoga mat these days, so you fly to Los Angeles, yoga capital of America, hoping for a little enlightenment: a quiet candlelit room, some gentle stretching, the chanting of mantras, a sage Indian guru dispensing ancient truths. But when you arrive at one of the most popular yoga centers in the country—the Bikram Yoga College of India in Beverly Hills—it's a giant mirrored studio crammed with more than 100 buff and sweaty devotees of the resident guru, Bikram Choudhury, a short
Indian fellow sitting on a raised-platform throne wearing nothing but a black Speedo swimsuit and a diamond-studded wristwatch.

"Inhale!" cries your new master. Soon you're lying on your stomach, grasping your ankles behind you, and swaying like a rocking horse, trying to hold the Bow Pose.

"Exhale!"

The heat is cranked up to 105 degrees—designed to turn your muscles into Silly Putty—and the sweat's flying. For the next 90 minutes, the closest you get to God is praying for this torture to stop. Then, lying in the Corpse Pose when it's all over, you begin meditating: 100 people times $20 apiece = $2,000 for one class; 2,000 students a week = $2 million per year. Given that Bikram has franchised his "hot yoga" method in 600 studios nationwide, and that 600 Bikram teachers will pay $5,000 each for his 60-day crash course this year, that's another $3 million annually. Throw in lecture fees, yoga seminars, books, videos, and a line of clothing and accessories, and Bikram's empire adds up to at least $7 million, making him one of the biggest players in the burgeoning industry of Yoga Inc.

After class you follow Bikram as he pads back to his office. A recognized yoga master at age 56—he won the National India Yoga Competition at age 11, the youngest ever—he sits behind his big desk and begins lecturing about the sacred eight-limbed path to enlightenment outlined in the ancient Yoga Sutra. The first limb is called "yama" and consists of five Sanskrit words that mean don't harm others, lie, steal, lust, or be greedy.

You nod enthusiastically. This is exactly what America needs: a thriving new industry built not on unethical behavior and ruthless opportunism but rather on timeless humanitarian ideals. Nobody knows how big the yoga market is, but with an estimated 18 million practitioners in the United States today—mostly affluent baby boomers who drive the wider $230 billion market in healthy, environmentally friendly products—it surely ranks in the hundreds of millions. But the business model that supports it must, by definition, defy the capacious ethos of our era, based as it is on a 5,000-year-old philosophy of selfless devotion to helping others achieve inner peace.

Excited by this prospect, you ask Bikram about some other forms of hatha yoga you might want to try—ashhtanga, iyengar, jivamukti—but he scowls at your temerity. "Nobody does hatha yoga in America except me!", he bellowed, offering as proof his celebrity students, ranging from George Harrison in 1969 to Madonna and Michael Jackson. "All of them are my students! All of them! ALL OF THEM! My name is Guru of the Stars."

Later on, Bikram brags about his mansion with servants in Beverly Hills and his 30 classic cars, from Rolls-Royces to Bentleys. He also claims to have cured every disease known to humankind and compares himself to Jesus Christ and Buddha. Requiring neither food nor sleep, he says, "I'm beyond Superman."

When you ask him how he can make such wild statements, he answers, "Because I have balls like atom bombs, you solemnly vow, will not detail your search for the pious new business model of Yoga Inc., surely in abundant evidence everywhere else.

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**Yoga Yama 1: Ahimsa Don't Harm Others**

_Yoga literally means "union with God" and encourages divine harmony with all things. Which raises an intriguing question: How do the biggest players in the yoga business reconcile _ahimsa_—that one's actions should never harm others—with the capitalist principle that one should always try to squash the competition like a bug?_

In short, not very well. Resentment has been brewing in recent years over what some yogis consider thuggish behavior by Yoga Journal magazine, the powerful nexus for the industry. Much of the bad karma flows toward Yoga Journal’s conference business. The Berkeley-based magazine pioneered
the concept of a yoga conference back in 1995, ostensibly to bring thousands together to teach, practice, and meditate. Today these one- to seven-day conferences draw more than 1,000 neophytes and longtime practitioners alike, who cough up as much as $850 apiece to bask in the sunny glow of star yogis like Rodney Yee.

At five conferences a year, this adds up to some serious money; fully 30 percent of Yoga Journal's estimated $11 million in annual revenue. Growth like that is what has inspired the magazine to launch bold new marketing gambits like the "Yoga Cruise." In February, for the first time, a luxury liner full of people doing the sun salutation will sail to the Caribbean—for as much as $2,600 per head.

As the conference business has grown, so has the number of yoga entrepreneurs seeking opportunity in various regions of our stiff-necked nation. Three years ago yoga teacher Jonny Kest started the Midwest Yoga and Wellness Conference in Ann Arbor, Mich.—only to discover how little airmanship was being practiced back at Yoga Journal. First, Kest says, the magazine refused to run his ads. (It took an outcry from the yoga community, he says, to make it reverse its policy a few months later.) Now, he claims, Yoga Journal is trying to run him out of business entirely by holding a conference next spring within weeks of his annual event and within 50 miles of his planned venue near Chicago.

"Yoga's not so big that you can have two major conferences in one area," Kest says glumly, noting that the magazine's marketing power and ability to attract celebrity yoga teachers could wipe him out. Why doesn't the magazine go into the vast areas that still don't have big conferences, he wonders, like the Northwest, the Northeast, or Toronto? "Yoga Journal is a monopoly," he sighs. "It's trying to do the Microsoft thing."

YOGA YAMA 2: SATYA
Don't Lie

Yoga Journal behaving like Microsoft? The same magazine that publishes earnest articles like "Love Thy Enemy"? Impossible. But then again, Yoga Journal is no longer the sleepy little nonprofit it was in back in 1975 when it was launched by the California Yoga Teachers Association. In 1998 a former Citicorp investment banker named John Abbott bought the magazine and began transforming it into a slick glossy. In place of New Agey pieces about crystals and how to conquer fear with trapeze flying, Abbott began publishing articles about exotic yoga travel destinations and celebrity yogis like Madonna and Sting. He even signed up supermodel Christy Turlington as the magazine's editor at large.

Fans are grumbled, but many in the yoga community give Yoga Journal credit—not only for raising yoga's overall profile but for raising serious issues, like coping with injuries and the health benefits of yoga. The results have been impressive. Since Abbott took over, paid circulation has tripled from 90,000 to 275,000, ad revenue has skyrocketed while the rest of the magazine industry slumps, and Abbott says his publication will turn a profit this year for the first time in 27 years.

Abbott, who has the bespectacled, balding look of a yoga-fit middle-age businessman, rebuts charges that his publication refused to run ads for competing conferences as "absolutely false." But Anne O'Brien, the director of the magazine's conference business before leaving a year ago, says Kest is right: Yoga Journal did, in fact, have a clear policy of not accepting ads from competing conferences, until complaints came pouring in. (She applauds the magazine, however, for reversing the policy, calling it "the right decision in the best interests of yoga.")

As for why Yoga Journal decided to hold its conference so close to Kest's event, Abbott chalks it up to pure coincidence. Plans for a Chicago-area conference began two years ago, he says—though O'Brien says Yoga Journal had never discussed it as of last August, when she left—so he didn't know about the Midwest Yoga and Wellness Conference, which drew 850 attendees last spring. Abbott denies he's trying to wipe out his competitors, but sources say that two years ago the magazine hired a consultant
who advised him to do exactly that by targeting markets all over North America that already host yoga conferences.

"I don't believe so," Abbott says when asked if that's true. "Maybe things are said over a beer..."

There's another reason, actually, for Abbott's reticence. While most executives love to jaw about going mano a mano with their competitors, such talk is verboten within the yoga industry because it violates ahimsa—even for Abbott, who confesses that he got into yoga not for its spiritual dimensions but to rehab a pulled hamstring. "It would be poorly for any person trying to grind others under to adopt business practices that are harming," he says. "In this space, if you're viewed as doing that, a lot of adherents will run away. If you practice in a class way, a predatory way, you won't be successful."

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**YOGA YAMA 3: ASTEYA**
Don't Steal

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E SUCCESSFUL" is the new mantra of the yoga universe, which has become so competitive that trying to crack the big leagues is far more difficult than it was even a few years ago. But how do yogis in our covenous culture separate themselves from the pack without violating artha, the yama that strictly forbids stealing? For millennia, the intricate techniques of yoga were passed down freely from teacher to student. Today they form a collection of highly marketable intellectual properties—a phenomenon that has only encouraged some rather unenlightened behavior.

Bikram says there has been so much stealing of his "lost yoga" techniques during the last few years that he had to spend $500,000 in January for a lawyer to trademark his sequence of 26 asanas, or yoga poses, as well as his word-forward monologues describing how to do them. Thus yoga, the franchise, was born. "People were doing illegal things," Bikram growls. "I had to stop them."

At Jivamukti in New York City—the downtown studio with 2,000 students per week and a website that lists 51 celebrity clients, from Steve Martin to Monica Lewinsky—owner David Life complains that several former teachers have set up shops nearby, offering the same method he painstakingly developed with co-owner Sharon Gannon during the last 17 years. "They're not calling themselves Jivamukti, but the staff is almost 100 percent certified through our training program," Life says, adding that he might consider taking action if they start using the word Jivamukti—which, naturally, the couple has trademarked.

Yoga teachers respond that big schools like Jivamukti and Yoga Works in Los Angeles don't pay them nearly enough—$25 per class with 10 students, plus $2.50 for each additional student the teacher attracts, is not unusual—despite having revenue of well over $1 million per year. Such schools make the situation worse, they say, by requiring teachers to sign contracts that prohibit them from teaching at other schools within a wide geographical radius. "Most teachers simply want to share it, to give the gift of yoga," says Mark Stephens, who recently opened the L.A. Yoga Center in Westwood. "Schools shouldn't have contracts preventing them from doing that."

Yoga scholars say these clashes are the inevitable result of trying to sell a spiritual experience that shouldn't be marketed in the first place. But that hasn't slowed the mad dash to own a slice of divinity.

When Stephens started his business, he was amazed to find that nearly every sacred yoga word or phrase had been trademarked. The latest: A New York company selling "perfumes and colognes and essential oils for personal use" has applied for a trademark for "shanti," the ancient Sanskrit word for peace.
A story has spread in recent years about the wonders yoga can do for your sex life—Seymour has waxed eloquent on the subject in interviews—the reaction is predictable: People start showing up for classes looking for some action, especially from the exquisitely toned teachers. This has become enough of an issue that the California Yoga Teachers Association has established a code of ethics that flatly states: “All forms of sexual behavior or harassment with students are unethical, even when a student invites or consents to such behavior or involvement.”

But, of course, it still happens. And now Rodney Yee, the man Time magazine called the “stud muffin” of yoga, is being sued by a former teacher at Yee’s studio in Oakland, Calif. The teacher claims that Yee refused to let her teach there after she confronted him about his alleged sexual affairs with students. In May, after the lawsuit was filed, one of Yee’s former students, Athena Pappas, released a statement saying that when her affair with him began, she was “vulnerable and sought his help as my teacher.” Another former student has also said publicly that she felt manipulated in her sexual relationship with Yee.

The fact that Yee has appeared everywhere from People to Yoga Journal, preaching about how yoga has helped his marriage and family life with three children, hasn’t done much for his credibility while the saga drags on. Yee was on a teaching tour of Indonesia and couldn’t be reached for comment, but his lawyer, Sanford Margolin, calls the lawsuit “much ado about nothing.”

Yee’s sex scandal is hardly the first to hit the yoga elite. In 1994, Amrit Desai of the Kripalu Center for Yoga and
Health in Lenox, Mass., resigned after admitting that he'd had affairs with three female followers—an ironic development, given that he'd made celibacy a cornerstone of his teaching. And in 1997, the Himalayan Institute of Honesdale, Pa., lost a $1.9 million judgment after a woman charged that its spiritual leader, Swami Rama, sexually assaulted her while she was a student there.

But are the gurus, in fact, the ones being victimized? The Speedo-clad Bikram certainly thinks so. Defending the behavior of Yee and Desai, Bikram says he himself was actually blackmailed several times into having sex with students. “What happens when they say they will commit suicide unless you sleep with them?” he says. “What am I supposed to do? Sometimes having an affair is the only way to save someone’s life.”

carpet and dim lighting, chants of Om...om...om... and a few people in baggy sweat-suits moving through their poses.

Later, lying again in the Corpse Pose, enlightenment dawns. There are thousands of devoted teachers like Dharma Mittra out there. You just don’t hear about them because they’re not driven by riches or fame. To them yoga is not a business at all, but a service through which they simply provide themselves with life’s necessities—the very definition of aparigraha. This was the idea behind Swami Vivekananda’s historic visit to Chicago in 1893, when yoga first arrived in the United States.

Rather than yoga changing America, however, the reverse is happening. Bikram recalls that when he started teaching in Los Angeles in the 1960s, he didn’t charge for his classes. After all, that’s how it was done in Calcutta, where he grew up. “In India, rich people built yoga schools,” he says. “Here, nobody builds anything. So how long can I teach yoga for free?”

So Bikram built an empire, not caring a whit that his flamboyant display of wealth and aggressive business tactics made him an embarrassment to the greater yoga community. Because he knows that Yoga Inc. has nothing to do with yamas. “I learned that when you are in Rome, you must do as the Romans do,” he says, his diamond-studded wrist watch flashing in the brilliant L.A. sunshine streaming through his window. “Hey, America is a beautiful country.”

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