

Naked emperors

“People come to me and think yoga is relax. They think little flower, little ting sound, some chanting, hanging crystal... No! Not for you! Waste of time! Here I chop off your dick and play ping-pong with your balls. You know ping-pong? That is yoga!” Bikram Choudhury (quoted in *Hell-Bent*)

I have wanted to write about Bikram Choudhury for a long time: the infamous Bikram, the hot yoga man. First, though, some background. I have practiced yoga for 20 years. In that time I have twice been to Bikram classes: once in London and once in California. Two good friends of mine with long-established yoga and spiritual practices swear by their regular Bikram sweat. I know of a senior Ashtanga teacher who has had the Bikram practice as her guilty secret. Is this the yoga equivalent deep-fried Mars bar? I know of outstanding teachers who started on that slippery mat in all the heat – who did their trainings with the man himself, who then earned their living as Bikram teachers. I have seen the snobbery towards those who practice this form as if it isn't 'real' yoga — whatever that may be.

To start at the beginning: I think that there can be some assumptions about the man behind the myths. At best, he is portrayed as bit of an idiot – at worst, a power-crazed megalomaniac obsessed with bling. Ridiculous 'explanations' are made for his behaviour: “he's from a region in India where it's considered normal to tell stories with a little 'flair' so what he says must be taken with a grain of salt”. (1) That is like saying everyone in Wales plays rugby (which is similar to a free-flowing version of American football but without padding) – or that all Scots eat haggis (a somewhat singular dish made from the heart, liver and lung of a sheep).

And then I read *Hell-Bent*. This is a great book by Benjamin Lorr with the wonderful subtitle of 'Obsession, pain and the search for something like transcendence in competitive yoga'. Unlike many yoga books, this grips with plenty of laugh out loud lines. Reading it, I started to think that maybe I had underestimated Bikram and that actually there is more to this story. It is clear that Bikram introduced many millions of people to yoga. And it is clear that there are excellent teachers within this system.

CONFUSIONS

I am confused by *Hell-Bent*: it is both maddening and inspirational, which could be a decent summarising of the Bikram brand. It certainly has some very funny lines: on dedicated practitioners – “innards so clean, their shit comes out with the same heft, virtue and scent of a ripe cucumber”. What is astonishing to me is that Lorr only started practicing yoga in 2008. This is astonishing because it reflects a lack of experience that potentially undermines the strength of his critique. A mere four years later, he had done the 11-week teacher training with the master

himself, starred at yoga championships, read hundreds of articles and books about yoga and now written one himself! My Ashtanga teacher has been practicing for more than 25 years and my Iyengar teacher began teaching in 1991 – and neither has written a book. Whatever happened to depth training and immersion in practice? Four years is a blink of an eyelid...

According to the book, Lorr wanted to lose weight. But perhaps there was an intention to write such a book as *Hell-Bent* from the beginning – or maybe not. Maybe he is just a very driven and striving practitioner, which is part of the inspiration. He details adventures in ‘the backbending club’ which became known as ‘the Jedi Fight Club’. The morning after I finished reading *Hell-Bent*, I was pushing myself deeper into backbends, enthused by such stories. From his account, I suspect that Lorr is one of the more naturally flexible: to get so quickly through postures – even with the addition of extreme heating – is unusual. But what is lacking in the details of this driving ambition is self-reflection. Who is the man in these sweaty mirrors? What are the motors of his personality that drove him to such extreme events as the Jedi Fight Club? What makes Lorr such an ambitious yogi?

As well as the personal accounts, this book contains an analysis of heat and how it impacts both body and mind. It is interesting that, over time, Bikram has demanded that the temperatures be increased for the classes. What started out at maybe 80-85 degrees has now sometimes become more like 110 (which is very hot – and to do strenuous exercising in such heat can potentially be harmful). Having said that, there is evidence that practicing in hot temperatures can be therapeutic for some people. One scientist states “heat acclimatisation is more practical than altitude training”. (2) But we have to consider the impact on our body when we go out from such high heats into much colder temperatures (as happens many months of the year in many countries). It can be a real shock to the system that perhaps over time could be damaging. Another view is that high levels of heat are draining for the adrenals and kidneys and that practicing in this way fuels existing imbalances, like overactive thyroids or the low secretion of serotonin.

These imbalances can push people towards their sympathetic nervous system (‘fight or flight’) when actually an aim of a grounded yoga practice is to encourage the parasympathetic system. This is the relaxation response where we are less defended, more open; the immune system is stronger, blood pressure decreases, digestive processes are improved. In short, the body gets on with nourishing and maintaining itself. When people are operating more in the sympathetic nervous system, there can be a mentality of self-punishment and flagellation. This can be true amongst Bikram practitioners, although obviously such tendencies are present in other forms of yoga.

MIRACLES AND MARVELS

But in *Hell-Bent*, there is an almost endless list of individuals who have recovered from serious injury and life-threatening illness, all thanks to Mr Bikram. It reads like a litany of the miracles and marvels of the modern world. This is not to denigrate very real experiences. The question here is: how does this happen?

After the accounts of extreme bending and a detailed explanation of pain and its mechanics, Lorr then investigates the placebo factor present: perhaps people are simply thinking themselves better. One reason is that they are taking responsibility for themselves, manifested by getting on the yoga mat. This is a fascinating discourse that has support from somewhat surprising places. A recent article in 'The Economist' ended with the words: "a healthy mind for a healthy body". (3) Research does indicate that we have an amazing ability to almost think ourselves well – and possibly this innate ability is drawn out by a practice like yoga.

As my reading *Hell-Bent* came to an end, I began *Sacred Fire: My Journey into Ashtanga Yoga* by Kino MacGregor. Ashtanga is one of my practices and Kino is one of very few teachers to receive certification from the guru, Pattabhi Jois. There are similarities between the two practices: both follow a regulated sequence of postures, both have gurus, both emphasise dedication to practice, both have been called McDonalds of the yoga world. There are also interesting contrasts between the two books. Lorr is a much better writer and *Hell-Bent* is an easier read. But Kino has some of the longevity that Lorr lacks; she has been practicing since the late 1990s, visited Mysore on numerous occasions to study with her guru and began teaching in 2002. As well as this practice, she has also done three 10-day SN Goenka-style Vipassana retreats.

HEART AND HONESTY

Kino is more open about herself. To me, there feels greater heart in what she has written. She describes eating issues and fears of falling in love, insecurities and neuroses. There are far fewer laughs but a greater exposing of herself as – like all of us – a wounded human being: "I am absolutely terrified of looking like a fool," she writes. There can be the danger of the too exposing an approach, of the self-disclosure culture. One view is that in the land of Oprah, such confessional heart-on-sleeve habits are perhaps more about marketing and rituals of authenticity rather than a radical honesty. With radical honesty, there can be the possibility of coming into alignment with who we actually are, a growing ability to authentically connect with each other and see the beauty in all of our imperfections

In the sincerity and sweetness of her devotion to Pattabhi Jois, she buys into the yoga orthodoxy which has been significantly disproved. She writes: "lineage in yoga...goes in an unbroken line from teacher to student back nearly 5000 years through Indian history". As Lorr points out in his book, such a perspective "would be laughable if it didn't point to a deeper, more desperate insecurity: the need to cling to false roots in the face of incredible recency of innovation". Rather than relying on dubious statements of the 'perfect pedigree', why does Kino not simply trust her own perceptions: "yoga led me from abusive relationships to happy ones"? Indeed, she asks Pattabhi Jois that golden question that expresses a theme in all of our lives: "Guruji, where can I find inner peace?"

Her journey leads from rapid progress through three series of the Ashtanga sequence (she comes up from drop-backs within two years; it took me

more than ten years to achieve this and then after a few years, I retired from doing it) to this: “the presence of God filled the room... everywhere I looked was new, fresh and alive...a resounding joy that echoed in the mountains of infinity”. She describes her first Vipassana retreat as “perhaps the best ten days of my life”. When I did a similar retreat, it was more like one of the hardest ten days of my life. Then towards the end of her book, there is this lovely description: “human beings are tender creatures, full of love”. After nearly ten years of intense practice, some of the deeper shells begin breaking: “I realised that I was motivated not always out of selfless service or pure intention, but instead by a conflict at a very deep level”. Of course this is true for nearly all of us; in her case, Kino talks of being “a scared little girl”.

SUGAR AND STEROIDS

These are lines that you would struggle to find in *Hell-Bent*; that is a shame. But Lorr does incisively critique the Bikram experience. He compares the actual practice to a sugar rush: it produces a great blast of energy, a quick high that is quite addictive. In a recent interview, he said: “physically, for some people there is an enormous rush that comes after class, like a runner's high on steroids...it is the feeling of relief after being completely wiped-out, the rebuilding after burning yourself to the ground”.

In such description, I wonder where you find the ethical pillars of yoga philosophy: compassion and truthfulness. In the Bikram system, there is remarkably little mention of meditation or pranayama or liberation. Instead, there is a revealing of Bikram's ability to cut out virtually everyone who gets close to him. Chad Clark was employed by him for several years as a heating consultant, clearly a very important position. Speaking of Bikram, he said, “Once you get sucked into that world, it's all madness...his personal studio was a death trap... I went through this slow realisation that he really and truly does not give a shit about other people... Bikram sees his yoga students as vessels like toilets and trash cans for him to treat as he wishes”.

The first words from Bikram on the training that Lorr attended were: “I want to make you rich” – a statement that leaves one wondering about the role of renunciation within this practice. He claimed that his last breakfast was May 1964 and prior to that meal, he taught Pope Paul VI yoga for a month. Lorr writes of other Bikram claims: he “invented the disco ball”, he wrote the script for ‘Superman’, he was “responsible for launching Michael Jackson's career”. At one of his yoga championships (which he dreams will make yoga an Olympic sport), Bikram stated, “I control 98.5% of yoga in this world”. Whatever happened to the other 1.5%?

A peak experience of Lorr's training was in his second week, with Bikram in a bad mood and the temperature thrust even higher. “The woman lies motionless and then twitches... I realise from the way the smell won't go away that there is a very real chance that the lean tattooed woman near me has shit her leotard... My body feels hot and blurry. I can hear muffled sobbing on all sides of me”. And where Bikram goes, unfortunately he is followed by many of his instructors. “The beatings will continue until morale improves” was a common

declaration at one training camp that Lorr attended, a statement made without satire or any trace of humour. This attitude is also reflected in some of the language in the imposed dialogue (instructors have to learn a specified script and then rigidly stick to those lines).

ALONENESS

It is clear from *Hell-Bent* that Bikram cannot bear to be alone, that he requires sycophants and audience. He is terrified of solitude. This is ironic, considering that many spiritual practices require a level of solitary existence. Lorr succinctly describes him as “both mesmerisingly effective and completely imbalanced”. And there are the dark shadows: the bullying, the isolating of anyone who questions Bikram’s control, the cruelty behind angry interactions with those who have supposedly crossed him, the financial meanness, the requesting of sexual favours. In the words of Lorr, “the magnetic exterior of the professional charismatic can be stripped away to reveal a desperate need for attention, a cold core of narcissism”.

Clearly Bikram has an amazing ability for commercialising and marketing his brand. This humble and highly dedicated yoga practitioner who arrived in California with very little is now running a multi-million operation. In his rise from rags to riches, his trainings now cost \$11,400 (or \$15,500 if you want your own room) and there are upwards of 400 people on each one. That is a gross of about \$4,000,000 – plus of course the merchandising and franchise costs that are paid by studios.

This could be another sign of the importance of peer groups. When Bikram first arrived in America, he was “a wonderful person”; he was determined to spread the gospel of yoga and willing to make considerable personal sacrifices for that spreading. But within a few years the story changed as he became more isolated at the top, choosing materialism and power, to be surrounded by needy people who would rarely confront his authority. His obsessive control contrasts sharply with Kino’s honesty: “even when I was at my thinnest I was still unhappy because I never addressed the voice inside my head that told me that I was not good enough”.

UMBRELLAS

Bikram cannot bear being challenged. As a result, his teaching structure is rigidly hierarchical. This is unlike Ashtanga, where there is more openhearted devotion to the guru and despite a systemised approach, there is greater freedom, with practitioners not tied so tightly to the structure. One consequence of this is greater sustainability of long-term practitioners. Tony Sanchez was considered to be Bikram’s foremost student until he was confronted by a situation in which he refused to compromise his integrity. Following the break with Bikram, he continued the voyage of inquiring. Now he says, “if yoga is going to evolve...I want to encourage free thinking and individuality, but that comes with debate, it requires rigour and well thought-out decisions”.

A barrier to evolving can be more about those around the guru rather than the guru themselves. One person practicing in Mysore, the home of Ashtanga

yoga, wrote of “the endless angelical looks, straight backs, picture perfect bodies, the constant question of ‘how many times have you been to Mysore’, the assumption that this is the only way can somewhat feel disturbing...there is something eerie about the belief that I must like this place and that I will come back”.

This ability to evolve is important in a world where there is increasing obesity, growing individualistic atomisation and higher levels of depression. By 2007, 10% of Americans over the age of 6 were regularly taking an antidepressant. About a quarter of Britons are classified as ‘obese’ (“so overweight as to be at risk from several serious illnesses, including diabetes and heart disease if action is not taken to control the weight”). Certainly we Westerners require exercise. Whether it is because of sedentary lifestyles or howling gales of emotional loneliness or gaping wounds of self-esteem, there is a need to move which the Bikram system can to some extent meet. The question is: at what cost? And just because the snake oil might work for some people does not mean that we let its salesman off the hook of ethical and accountable behaviour.

Under this umbrella called ‘yoga’ there are many different formulas. There are crooks and charismatics, there are wonderfully compassionate human beings all operating inside this four-letter description. With Bikram, there is definitely some beauty in the being. Like all charismatics, there is charm. But the longer this legend lives on, the thinner and more tattered it becomes. Bikram appears to be more desperate, flailing around for the oxygen of publicity, craving attention. It is a shame that the journey that began in Calcutta is ending in such a sad way.

Lorr comes to the conclusion Bikram ticks every box in the formal criteria for diagnosing narcissistic personality disorder, for example, “preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, ideal love”. There is brilliance in Bikram but there is plenty that is barking and bonkers – and some that is plainly dangerous. Lorr suggests that it is time to kill the guru: “in an open, thorough and probably horribly difficult process”.

There are many possibilities within this practice of yoga that are reflected in both of these books. It is important to acknowledge that there are different paths towards this place, a place that Kino describes as becoming able to say yes to life. An essential element of saying yes to life is challenging our teachers – as are stoking the fires of devotion and polishing the windows of perception.

NOTES

(1) Comment on Yogadork story <http://yogadork.com/news/lawsuits-copyrights-and-yoga-a-letter-from-greg-gumucio-on-his-case-vs-bikram/>

(2) Santiago Lorenzo at the University of Oregon, quoted in *Hell-Bent*.

(3) <http://www.economist.com/news/science-and-technology/21567876-you-can-it-helps-think-well-yourself-first-place-think-yourself>

EPILOGUE

Thanks to Mark (for *Hell-Bent*), thanks to Heather (for *Sacred Fire*) and thanks to Ben (for ‘The Economist’). Thanks to Maitripushpa for her wonderful way with

words. Collaboration and sharing are important elements on these paths of practice. Having examined these two books, a legitimate question is: why did I decide to write this piece? The answers are multiple (as answers nearly always are): partly as a hobby, partly as a process to deepen understanding which can help fuel transformation, partly as a good friend once said: “my highest spiritual moments can come at the keyboard”. Partly because an aspect of my dharma practice is perhaps spreading ideas and encouraging thought (a thread throughout my adult life). And because as much as I enjoy the stillness of sitting and the strength of stretching, I love making words play across a page. Thank you for getting so far – thank you for the story so far.

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