Yoga's a Hit at USA Health Clubs
Category : May 1992
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1992

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I could feel the pounding disco beat shake the floor a hundred feet away. As we entered the aerobics exercise room, we were greeted by raucous music counterpointed with enthusiastic yells from the class of 35 gamboling women. Arun Ranade, whose yoga class we had come to visit, explained this was a typical aerobic evening workout at the Clayton Valley Athletic Club a mile from HINDUISM TODAY'S editorial offices in Concord, California. Arun escorted me to his yoga room - one thin door away from the aerobics session. Inside a half-dozen students were ready for an hour of stretching, bending, deep breathing, relaxation and Patanjali-style quieting of the mind under Arun's skilled direction - able to somehow not only tolerate but actually transcend the less-than-contemplative environment.

Our nocturnal visit was prompted by a February article in the US magazine, Newsweek, which stated, "Yoga classes are in demand at urban health clubs across the country, and longstanding yoga studios in New York, Chicago and California report sharp rises in attendance in the past year." Why? In a word, said the magazine: stress. Stress of high-paced jobs and the even higher recession-created stress of no job at all. The San Francisco Examiner followed on with a page-one story which stated, "The fitness craze of the '90s can be measured by the mantra, 'There's no place like om.' Yoga has come down off its mountain. It's the newest, hippest health fad - and it's 4,000 years old." Suya Colorado of The San Francisco Bay Club told the Examiner. "We're entering a new phase here. Yoga is trendy now."

This was a trend HINDUISM TODAY needed to see for itself, which brings us back to the yoga class at the Clayton Valley Athletic Club. With 2,500 members and 75,000 square feet of space, it is the largest health club in the area. A full membership costs US$ 300 initiation fee and $70 per month. Cindy Gilmore, the club's aerobics director said, "I think there is an increased need for meditation and stress reduction." Arun's first yoga classes last year were met with an enthusiastic response.

Arun's class proceeded smoothly in spite of the music and pounding floor throughout the hour of basic exercises. Classical hatha yoga poses were interspersed with preparatory stretches. Class concluded with an informal meditation in which Arun led the students to first concentrate on, then completely ignore, any outside distractions; then listen to and absorb a series of positive affirmations.

Just as the setting was not that of a typical yoga class, neither were these students. John, an overly stiff runner, was there to loosen his joints, Vicky at the recommendation of her physical therapist. And then there was Yuko, a mortgage banker with a "very stressful job," who really needed to relax. This same ratio occurred in most of the classes I visited-one third do yoga for flexibility, one third for physical therapy and a third for stress. There tends to be more women than men in the average class.

Next stop was a 6:00 A.M. yoga session at The San Francisco Bay Club where Deirdra Carrigan conducts eight classes a week. The Rolls-Royce parked in front amidst a collection of Mercedes, BMW's and Porsches gave some indication of Bay Club's elite clientele - the monthly fee is $105. A private shuttle bus takes members back and forth from the nearby financial district. Deirdra's class had been meeting for two years at that time, working mostly in Iyengar-style hatha yoga. She had a strenuous workout, leaving me a bit sore the following day from a few unfamiliar routines. Class member Charlie Kuyk, a CPA with the firm of Price Waterhouse said, "I'm here for the physical stretching aspects as well as the calmness that comes through yoga." Architect Stan Shuman, 45, learned yoga to offset the impact of scoliosis and polio. The Bay Club, Deirdra explained, had made a real commitment to the yoga program by scheduling classes nearly every day and purchasing all the necessary class props for the Iyengar-style routines.

Swami Satchidananda's Integral Yoga Institute was my next stop. This is a traditional ashram setting, and the spiritual atmosphere was strong. But even the yoga classes in the health clubs can create a noticeable spiritual vibration - unexpectedly, considering the environment. This 15-member beginner class held in the quiet IYI ashram loft spent an hour doing relatively easy poses aimed at creating total relaxation - enough relaxation to result in a few snores during an extended "corpse pose." Jan Prins, a 37-year old salesman, said, "I started coming here for stress management purposes. My previous job was very stressful." Christina Diotalevi, 27, a graduate student in anthropology, "came here for a sense of focus and spiritual balance." A quick poll of the class indicated that again about a third were there for stress reduction. The San Francisco IYI center conducts 19

drop-in hatha yoga classes a week with a total weekly attendance of about 600 students. Cost is $5.00 per student per class. They haven't experienced a "boom" in enrollment, rather a steady growth over the years. Their New York center runs 36 classes a week serving an average of 570 students at $7.00/class. Swami Divyananda said that "the great majority come for stress reduction and relaxation."

My last stop was The Yoga Room in Berkeley for a beginner's class by Mary Lou Weprin. Similar in content to Diedra's class, it was decidedly less strenuous. The long hour and a half session with 10 women and four men was a thorough workout focusing on the pelvis, spine and upper back. Again, stress reduction was a major motivation for students. Bakery owner Carolyn, there with her daughter Sarah, said she had come to "stretch, relieve stress and become more flexible."

Like all the dedicated centers, The Yoga Room offers courses for instructors. It is, in fact, one of the foremost yoga teacher training facilities in the country. Adept hatha yogis, such as Deirdra who takes advanced classes here, can go on to even make a living as instructors. It is hard work, though - Deirdra scampers all over San Francisco giving two dozen classes at half a dozen locations every week, including one at an engineering firm during lunch hour. One thing about health club work though - instructors have to "look the pan," which for ladies means at least a passing semblance to actress and workout guru Jane Fonda.

So is there a major trend here as Newsweek and the Examiner reported? Yes and no. The traditional ashrams and yoga studios have been doing a good business in hatha yoga for quite a few years - in continuity out of the 60s. And their students have always included business people and professionals seeking relaxation and stress reduction, as well as spiritual seekers and those in need of physical therapy. What is new is the introduction of these into mainstream health and athletic clubs. That ties yoga into the new awareness that proper fitness is essential for both health and peace of mind.

The "fitness trend" is considered by such respected futurologists as Megatrends author John Naisbett to be a permanent change in the society, and not a passing fad. In that context the new incorporation of yoga takes on added long-term significance. Yoga - the ancient Hindu system of refining the mind through positions of the body - is filling in where a lot of other approaches have failed. In the search for relaxation people have tried jogging and aerobics, encounter groups

and singles bars, movies and television, even drugs and alcohol. Today there are a few, and later there may be many, who turn to yoga for a real and permanent change in their lives.

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