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Reprise for an Ancient Art: “Have some Pop Yoga with that Cafe au Lait?”

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The dike is breaking and the little wagging thumb of yogic fundamentalism can't hold it back. “Yoga”—that stranger from Olde Olde India—is devouring influences from American popular culture and becoming—*like Rock and Roll*—a US folk art. Adjusting to the age, yoga is now as hip as the Prius, pre-frayed jeans or Youtube. Like any immigrant child, it's careless of its roots. Yoga has gone “pop.”

This is evolution! (Or devolution, depending on your point of view). Yoga has always been friends with “The New.” If we roll back 85 years, we find a 34-year-old Sanskrit scholar named Turmalai Krishnamacharya emerging from a cave in Tibet and popularizing an athletic spiritual practice known as Hatha Yoga. To create appeal, he integrated Hatha with Indian wrestling forms and British garrison training. “Old K” as I'll call Krishnamacharya with a looooooong bow, was just one more innovator in a tradition whose very pith was adaptability to circumstance. His big-time students (and now-veritable Rock Stars) B. K. S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois, have made new yoga forms, too.

But to listen to adherents in America, you'd think Iyengar and Jois' systems were found carved on stones in Moses' backyard. Few people realize the world's most popular yoga (Iyengar's method) really came from decades of lonely innovation by one rags-to-riches Indian genius. B. K. S. Iyengar spent just parts of 3 years studying with Old K

before leaving him to do yoga 10 hours daily for the next gazillion years. (After 25 years, he published the modern “Bible” of the art, *Light on Yoga*—and changed the yoga planet).

Though Indians had always sat still to meditate, Iyengar invented a complex static practice. He decided that moving yoga had “ill effects” and kept yogis from “going deep.” K’s other rock star student, Jois, stuck to a systematized moving form (“Ashtanga”), claiming it came from an ancient treatise he researched in a Calcutta library. But Iyengar, who lived with K and Jois at the time, said no Calcutta visit ever happened. Other observers, too, believe the treatise is a fiction. That said, even Jois adjusted details of his Ashtanga yoga over the years.

All arts and sciences, including those claiming divine authorship, are subject to differing needs in differing eras. Ashtanga and Iyengar yoga are just two examples of this shift, but more examples appear on our cultural radar everyday . . .

Listen! You can put *a yoga* together with pals in a garage like Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten--all pluck and ambition and skimpy training, or you can compose it like Tori Amos, working from fundamentals learned at age three--interweaving technique from the Best Teachers in The World. Whatever your yoga, its success depends on the nerves you hit with the forms you make in the culture you live in—and knowing the old, old yoga tradition ain’t necessarily what makes that so.

Winning yoga teachers must recognize the idiom of their age. Yoga has aims and principles (like any art), but no there’s no Trikonasana Tribunal to censor yoga forms. Tantra scholar Douglas Brooks says, “Ultimately yoga will transform, as it always has, to accommodate innovations in the practice and to suit the needs of those who lay claim to

its many legacies.” Indian texts reveal a 2000-year debate about this legacy. The debate continues (you are reading it now!) Amidst this, the great Iyengar instructor Tony Briggs reminds us that, “The outer form is not the inner form.”

Yoga’s shapeshifting isn’t restricted by trademark (Bikram Yoga’s pose-sequence copyright notwithstanding). Anyone practicing yoga in many styles, knows its breadth. Trusting this, the living yogis use dance, fighting arts, medicine, massage, acrobatics, philosophy, music, contact improv, hypnotism, weight-training, and physical therapy to re-engineer Pop Yoga. Its locus is the body and there are dangers in yoga’s reckless application there. But the body is a wise and worthy ground for experiment. Yoga has always been a *vira* (hero) path, after all. It was first codified in a time when the warrior caste was ascendant in India. Yoga *is* dangerous. Inspiring the band *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*, that old Brit superstar, Winston Churchill, said, “I promise you blood, tears, toil, and sweat.” Americans soften through yoga, but they do it in the midst of effort, sweat and danger.

Pop Yoga isn’t only sweet surrender and sweat equity. Winston Churchill was a hardass ‘cause he wanted to save Britain. In the final analysis, Pop Yoga is a deceptively soft art because it wants to save the world.

Like Rock and Roll, Modern Pop Yoga is *anarchistic*--not in a booger-flick-to-authority sense, but as Anarchism’s 19th century spokesman, Mikhail Bakunin, meant it: yoga attempts to create evolved human beings whose relationship to inner law (*dharma*) enforces perfect integrity (thereby, Bakunin would add, “making state controls unnecessary!”). This is a perennial yogic ideal. You say you want a revolution? The new revolution is within.

Pop Yoga is an altruistic movement and a path of wisdom, and it is also a path of teaching. *Yoga Journal* cover boy, Rodney Yee may be beautiful as Beyonce (do I overreach?); he's charismatic, skilled in his art, and *a poet*, but he must teach to make fame stick. As a megastar, he embodies yoga's altruistic, evolutionary, and physical culture appeal, but unlike other luminaries, *Rodney has a classroom!* Pop Yoga's leaders are educational heroes. They are returning teaching to prominence as a public craft—something not seen in America since mid-century.

Superstar teachers, good teachers, mediocre teachers and even bad teachers lead micro-communities that are fan-club-sewing-circle-aerobics-class hybrids. The Sanskrit term *kaula* (“family”) applies to them—just as it has always applied to outcaste guru-disciple groups. These groups are lightweight “families” that might one day wander pastorally, and another day settle down to practice. *Sangha*, is another modern term for yogi groups, but it is a Buddhist term, referring to collectives more enduring than yogic ones. *Kaula* can mean “of a noble family” like the term *kula*, which is also used nowadays, but *kaula* specifically denoted worshippers of Shakti in the medieval Indian tradition and Shakti continues as a goddess and physical force in today's Pop Yoga (particularly Siddha Yoga). A *kaula* was never a blood-kin group, as in the Chinese *Qui Gong* tradition, nor a bantamweight family as in a Christian fellowship, nor a heavyweight family as in a monastic community. To open a debate perhaps, I ordain *kaula* for general use to describe yoga groups! (Ok, Ok! *Kula* does sound better! And it might win at day's end. But please note that it indicates “a herd of female buffaloes,” too. That *could* shoot it down . . .)

Kaulas find teaching intimacy in wildly different settings (it's amazing where you find yoga these days), and kaulas chase counter-cultural goals like any good garage band. Yogis rattle socio-political-religious-corporeal cages. Starting with their own heart, lungs and limbs, yogis make worldchange through selfchange--meeting American activist tradition halfway. Most people starting a yoga practice already know what it means to have their "consciousness raised."

As Pop Yoga becomes commonplace, as Americans throw off their awe of mountaintop ascetics in old, old India, they spin their practice into a great awakening that enhances the senses, increases moral action and expands conscientious participation in society—that is, if the present moral spirit and the Ten Commandments of yoga, the *Yamas* and *Niyamas*, continue to lead yogis by the ear.

In the revolution of new yogas--Rasa Yoga, Shadow Yoga, Get Real Yoga, Jivamukti, Anusara, etc., etc., etc.--some are little-known and some have rock star leaders who've escaped yoga's big tents. In pop music, Joe Strummer left *The Clash* (for the sake of *cash*) and Ice Cube got out of *Niggers With Attitude* (for creative *latitude*). When US Yoga Association founder, Tony Sanchez left behind Bikram Yoga (the most *pop* of pop yogas) to follow his ideals, his mentor, Bikram Choudrey told him he'd die. Sanchez took the chance.

I know a yogini whose fluid body, intellectual brilliance and inspiration for posework lead her from Ashtanga Yoga to serial novel forms, whose name changes are regular, but whose power is cogent. She's like the neighborhood bar singer, *cum laude* out of Julliard, hammering out a basement sound, self-producing CDs that you snatch up

with a molten heart when her performance ends. She has wildflower brilliance and you want to learn everything from her style.

Someday, she might have Baron Baptiste's fame. Baptiste is the bandanna-wrapped doyen of Power Yoga and the Jacob Dylan of modern pop practice. He's the child of rock star-famous yoga teachers who became a rock star on his own. Baron's ma and pa, Maganna and Walt Baptiste, opened up a San Francisco studio in the 60's, nursing flower children on the arts of India--hosting visiting swamis while becoming royalty in American body-building. Maganna was a runner-up to Miss USA. Walt was Mr. America, a keynote speaker at the Kumbha Mela (India's swami Woodstock), and a *yogiraj*—"king of yoga," as anointed by the famous Swami Sivananda. His son, Baron, is a modern Prince.

Brit punks, black culture and southern boy sadness inspired pop beats for half a century, but India's soul has been the pot o' gold for yoga for millennia. Old Paris faded as art's epicenter. It used to draw artworld superstars to its galleries, alleys and cafes, but India persists as yoga's motherhome, drawing determined yogis worldwide for "authentic" teaching. India is Mecca. India is Motown. India is Rhythm and Blues. B. K. S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois--with their static and flowing styles--are twin kings of Hatha Yoga's Pop form. They are its Freud and Jung, its Lennon and McCartney, its Picasso and Matisse.

When the Parisian stars of art fled the Nazis, filing through New York in the 40s, (all the while whining about the absence of Manhattan espresso) Jackson Pollock and his crew mixed among them. Seeing these Europeans as just a bunch of dudes jonesing for their own kind of drink, the American abstract painters "killed their fathers," to use

Freud-speak. They got free from awe, then used their alcohol-fueled vision to create a new international style, redrafting artworld geography and making New York the *Avante Garde*'s womb. We who visit India, learn the wisdom of our gurus, but we learn, too, that they're *just a bunch of dudes* and we can transcend them. Homeland then becomes Motherhome for American yoga, as we advance the angles on this old, old mother-art.

These are change times. Yoga is in the midst of a renaissance. Yin Yoga luminary, Paul Grilley says, "It doesn't get any better than this." We're creating postmodern yoga for postmodern bodies eating postmodern foods in postmodern climes reacting to postmodern pleasures and postmodern pains. Is science owned by any nation? The medical science of Ayurveda, leashed to yoga practice since long past, has always preached adaptation to contexts. Philosophies transcend. But potions used in India must be modified to work in America. Inner technologies and outer technologies both get re-engineered for a new world. Yoga's international progress has created Pop Yoga, a form found in gyms, not caves, with various teachers, not single gurus--and with physical practice as the primary thing. It is arguable that yoga's depths remain hidden in this new form. But can depth disappear? Pop Yoga's broad appeal touches more lives, pointing the way for the bold ones willing to search out depth.

The yoga fundamentalists believe lack of depth is a disease! A yoga that sticks to fundamentals—even those new-made by Iyengar and Jois--is held up as the best yoga. Let us bow to Fundamentalism! It tends yoga tree's roots—which must be husbanded just as like fruit and the flowers. Fundamentalists will always have the first word, but innovators will inevitably have the last.

One of yoga's creation myths says 8,400,000 asanas were taught by the God Siva

to a whale-swallowed yogi on the seafloor. Yet, eight million asanas can't defend yoga from Aldous Huxley's famous question to the world's artists: "Is that all?" At day's end, it's probably OK that Americans need creativity in their yoga as much as in their cars, clothes and cinema. Yoga's principles are eternal, but each new jitter asks its new cure.

Create, brothers and sisters of America! Refine Pop Yoga and reform the world! Maybe it will put your smiling face on the cover of *Yoga Journal* . . . or even the cover of *The Rolling Stone*.