

What happened to yoga?

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Teachers wonder where it's heading, while they try to steer it away from commercialism and other distractions

By Linda Matchan, Globe Staff | October 14, 2010

A few months ago, Boston yoga teacher Natasha Rizopoulos conducted a weekend workshop to teach experienced yoga students how to be instructors. She led them through three rigorous hours of postures and a long meditation, and discussed the philosophy of yoga, explaining the transformative power of physical practice that helps train the mind to be fully present.

But as she expounded on the benefits of yogic principles, two students in the class didn't quite grasp the idea of spiritual enlightenment. Sitting cross-legged, they were busy firing off text messages.

"It was astonishing," said Rizopoulos. "And this was a self-selecting, serious group."

For this reason, among others, Rizopoulos is aligning herself with some of the country's foremost yoga teachers who are trying to take back yoga from the masses who they believe are running afoul of the traditions of a 5,000-year-old spiritual, intellectual, and physical discipline.

"Everyone is afraid to talk about the white elephant in the yoga room," said Justine Wiltshire Cohen, founder of Down Under Yoga in Newton. She has invited Rizopoulos and three other nationally-known Boston-based yoga teachers — Barbara Benagh, Patricia Walden, and Peentz Dubble — to teach at her new studio. Some of them will participate in a "summit" on Sunday to discuss the future of yoga in America. Yoga, she said, is supposed to be "an art passed down from teacher to student." It's meant to calm the fluctuations of the mind. It advocates *ahimsa*, which means "do no harm;" and *aparigraha* or non-possessiveness.

"Humility is the whole point," said Wiltshire Cohen, a lawyer-turned-yoga teacher whose training included Sanskrit, anatomy, yoga philosophy, and yoga history and who said that studying yoga was harder than law: "I didn't cry in law school."

But humility, they say, is becoming less and less the point these days. "My worry is that . . . what we do in the yoga room is becoming the same as what we do outside the yoga room," said Rizopoulos, a former ballet dancer who studied yoga in India. "Which is behaving like lunatics."

Patricia Walden, who has taught yoga in Boston since the 1970s and considers yoga a spiritual calling, remembers when it was different. She's one of only two North Americans to hold a senior advanced certificate in the Iyengar method of yoga. (The founder, B.K.S. Iyengar, is her guru; she travels to India to study with him.) Her DVDs, including "Yoga for Beginners" helped popularize yoga worldwide, and she still teaches internationally as well as in Cambridge and the Down Under studio.

The yoga she recalls from the 1960s and '70s grew out of the counter-culture movement's infatuation with Eastern philosophies. It was a time when Indian swamis who embraced yoga as a full spiritual practice were opening ashrams in the United States, and yoga was embraced by seekers, intellectuals, Woodstock attendees, and a wide variety of Om-chanters. "It was deeply wedded to psychedelics," said Stefanie Syman, author of a new yoga history called "The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America."

Yoga classes were no-frill; there were no special yoga clothes or yoga mats. "We just used the floor," said

Walden. “It was what I’d call “flow and glow” yoga: You’d turn the lights down really low and the students were in a circle and we gave them instructions with their eyes closed. We never got up to adjust anybody or tell anybody what to do.”

Yoga was so exotic back then, she said, most people had never heard of it. Once, a man sitting next to her on an airplane asked her what she did for a living and he thought she was talking about yogurt. When she explained, he smirked and dared her to put her leg around her head.” “I’m sure I rose to the occasion,” said the lithe Walden, doing an effortless encore in her living room.

What happened to yoga in the last 30 years?

“It’s recombined with dominant forms of the culture; it’s very malleable that way,” said Syman. There is yoga for every taste, energy level, and aspirant — hip-hop yoga, hot yoga, rock pop yoga, weight loss yoga, Christian yoga, even “Yoga Booty Ballet,” which bills itself as a dynamic fusion of yoga, booty sculpting, and cardio-dance. If there is any doubt that yoga has left the ashram and joined the mainstream, consider that yoga was part of this year’s Easter Egg Roll festivities on the White House lawn.

It’s also been “monetized,” Syman said. Practiced by celebrities, fitness buffs, and fashionistas, yoga is a \$6 billion industry with some 16 million American followers. Many of those millions are pouring into the trendy lululemon yogawear stores — purveyor of \$90 yoga mats, \$25 yoga water bottles, \$40 yoga towels, and other nonessential yoga accessories such as yoga thong underwear and an \$88 “yoga mat carry system” with a “Helmet friendly design.” [So you won’t hit your head with your mat while riding your bike.]

Even the venerable magazine *Yoga Journal*, considered the bible for yoga practitioners, has evolved from a nonprofit publication founded in 1975 in a Berkeley basement to a glossy magazine with celebrities on the cover and sexy ads for pricey yoga gear, a trend that’s infuriated one of its founding editors.

“I feel sad because it seems that *Yoga Journal* has become just another voice for the status quo and not for elevating us to the higher values of yoga: spiritual integration, compassion and selfless service,” Judith Hanson Lasater wrote in a recent letter to the editor.

Yoga Journal’s editor in chief, Kaitlin Quistgaard, said she “completely respected” Lasater’s letter, “but we also need to run a commercial venture. . . . We are Americans and one thing Americans do is shop and like nice things. And one of the ways we identify ourselves is having a certain look. The yoga industry does support our desire to create self-identity through what we wear or what we purchase.”

Yoga may be malleable, but can it still be considered yoga?

This is the “white elephant” question that Justine Wiltshire Cohen is posing at the Oct. 17 summit, “Balancing Acts: Poses, Products, and the Future of Yoga in America.” It’s being held at the brand-new Down Under Yoga studio in Newtonville, Wiltshire Cohen’s first permanent location after years of teaching in Newton churches.

Her website makes it clear where she stands on the question. “We believe that yoga studios should act in ways that are consistent with the teachings of yoga,” it says. “We will never sell plastic water bottles that go into landfills [because *ahimsa* means ‘do no harm’]. We will never sell \$150 yoga pants [because *aparigraha* means ‘identifying greed’]. We will never accept offers from companies to promote their gear in exchange for free publicity or products (because *satya* means “truthfulness”). We will never brand, trademark, or pretend we’ve made up a new style of yoga.”

This is a less than subtle reference to a trend that’s disturbing not just to Wiltshire Cohen but to other yoga traditionalists. One brand, though not the only one, that seems particularly irksome is the growing Texas-based global empire of Anusara yoga, a relatively new hatha yoga system founded by John Friend, who teaches worldwide and sells clothing, jewelry, and music. He blogs, tweets, and characterizes himself on his website as

“one of the most charismatic and highly respected hatha yoga teachers in the world.” Friend was recently featured in a New York Times magazine article, which he noted in a three-page rebuttal posted on his website was “the largest article on yoga ever published in a major newspaper. . . . For me, it is another clear sign that Grace supports Anusara.”

“The minute yoga is packaged and branded, you’ve lost it,” Wiltshire Cohen contends.

At 38, she is the youngest of the teachers participating in the summit, and in some ways the most adamant that yoga is losing its way. “It can’t be that any time you are moving your body in any way, it’s yoga. Otherwise, *walking* is yoga,” said Wiltshire Cohen, a lean, vibrant Australian who was introduced to yoga by her journalist parents when they taught English to Tibetan monks in the Dalai Lama’s community. “And when you have a fairly untrained teacher who knows nothing of anatomy, who is yelling names of poses at breakneck speed in a fashion that only an 18-year-old gymnast can follow, is that safe? And is that in keeping with ahimsa?”

“Yoga has become very popular in the last 10 years which is wonderful,” said her colleague Peentz Dubble, who directs the Iyengar program at Down Under Yoga. “But as wonderful as it is to bring yoga to the masses, there’s some concern that we don’t kind of dilute it.”

Down Under Yoga will host a panel discussion Sunday, Oct. 17, at 6:30 p.m. called “Balancing Acts: Poses, Products, and the Future of Yoga in America.” It’s part of the daylong yoga events marking the opening of the new studio at 304 Walnut St., Newtonville. 617-244-9642. www.downunderyoga.com Linda Matchan can be reached at l_matchan@globe.com. ■