

## **BIOPHILE – SEPT 2007**

Eight weeks into my vegan way of life and I find myself addicted to a new form of exercise – well, new to me. Yoga.

Yes, I know what you're thinking and I agree. How utterly predictable. How alarmingly stereotypical. What other exercise would a carrot cruncher adopt? I mean, how many vegan kick boxers do you know? Or vegan rally drivers? But vegan Yogis? They must be as numerous as lentils at a Sherpa shindig.

Now I must tell you that I've been a passionate disciple of every exercise fad to have cursed the planet during the past 30 years. My arms have thwapped my thighs every morning on the Army and Navy Routine; I've 'gone for the burn' with Jane Fonda and spinned (or should that be spun?) till my knees begged for mercy. I've tap danced with Delia Sainsbury (remember her?) and power walked the suburbs of Jozi. But if my exercise of choice couldn't be done to loud, fast music - preferably The Village People - I wasn't interested. (Oh, shut up would you – they weren't considered naff then!)

But, nowadays, here I am, attending a regular Bikram Yoga class and moving with chameleon-like slowness in complete silence. The room is heated to a temperature which Laurence of Arabia would find insufferable, I'm sweating like a miner down a shaft, contorting my steel-band sinews into configurations which defy description and gravity – and I'm LOVING it!

What The Hell Is Happening Here? And what's next for Krishna's sake? Ankle bells and Hessian draw-string knickers?

The point is that I didn't gravitate towards yoga because of its philosophical symbiosis with veganism. In truth, I hadn't a clue (then) that most forms of the discipline emphasize one's interconnectedness with all living things. Key to yoga is the issue of non-violence – to self, to other sentient beings and to the planet. Not only was I in ignorance of these facts when I signed up but, as many will tell you, I have always relished the chance to commit verbal violence against the odd traffic cop or call-centre automaton.

I joined my yoga class because at the age of 47, I have finally realized that my Gran was right all along: you're only as young as your spine. (And to think I've been trying all these years to test the other version of that truism: you're only as young as the man you feel!) Despite the fact that I have always kept myself fit, my flexibility has gradually decreased and I now realize that if I want to ride a motorbike in my eighties, I'd better start loosening up.

Now I am about as supple as a baobab, so while the rest of the Bikram class is still and balanced, I'm flailing around in the corner like a flamingo on a bad trip. Ah well, at least I can make them all feel Olympian! But a strange thing happens, because while directing my attention to my physical form and its shortcomings, a subtle change is occurring in my mindset and conduct.

And not only during the sessions either. I am definitely becoming calmer, more accepting and (dare I say it?) more loving. Is that because I'm no longer consuming the stress hormones of animals that have lived and died in agony? Or is it because yoga is inducing happy hormones into my mind and limbs? Either way, I sometimes catch myself these days behaving like some wafty waif from an ashram, with a beatific smile on my face and the knowing look of someone who has glimpsed Nirvana.

Can it be that one who's spent her whole life stinging like a bee is now going to float like a butterfly?

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