

Annie Blewett

The yogi rattles off instructions at the speed of an auctioneer. “Lean back. Go back. Fall back. Way back. More back.”

The yoga students follow his command, leaning deeper into the position.

The yogi shouts at a student to push harder. “Yelling equals love in yoga,” he says with a laugh.

The students are dripping with sweat, so much so that they need to cover their yoga mats with towels. The men are shirtless. The women are in sports bras and shorts.

This yoga class is 90 minutes long in a 105-degree room at 40 percent humidity. This is Bikram Yoga, a workout craze that is gaining national popularity and getting mixed reviews.

Each Bikram Yoga class is exactly the same: the same temperature, the same 26 poses and two breathing exercises, each done twice, and the same instructions on each pose from the teacher.

Bikram Yoga was created by Bikram Choudhury, a man who studied yoga in India from the age of 4, and brought his practice to the United States in 1973 and has become increasingly popular.

There are six Bikram Yoga studios in Maryland, seven in Virginia, and 308 studios in the U.S. in total, either already in business or opening within the next six months.

Bikram Yoga Baltimore, located at Cockeysville, serves approximately 500 students each week.

Owner and instructor of Bikram yoga Baltimore, Eddie Garner, was introduced to the practice in September of 2004 by his wife, Emily. At the time, Garner was living in New York, and was “hooked immediately” after taking his first class.

“This is the answer to everything I want in life,” says Garner, who has since committed his life to the practice. Garner and his wife became certified instructors and moved to Baltimore three years ago to take over the studio he owns now.

The Bikram series and dialogue (the instructions given by the teacher) is copyrighted to ensure that it stays consistent and allows each student to get the same outcome each class.

“The postures don’t change, your body changes,” says the 31-year-old about the major difference between most yoga classes and Bikram yoga.

He adds, “All yoga is good yoga, but Bikram is best.”

Others disagree with this assertion.

Sue George, director of Shenandoah Yoga in Harrisonburg, Va., compares yoga to a tree.

“You’ve got a trunk, where there’s lots of things in common, and then you have all these branches that come off and split more and split more...Bikram is just one of those branches...Would you say any one branch is more important?”

Bikram Yoga gets both positive and negative reactions from those who have taken a class.

“That’s what I like to do, is sweat,” says Kerri Koch, 31, after finishing her second class on a positive note. She plans to continue taking classes once or twice a week, but would only be inhibited by the cost of the classes.

Liz Stuehrmann, a 19-year-old sophomore at University of Maryland Baltimore County takes a class daily. After taking her first class in 2004, she was frustrated by the difficulty of the class, and swore she would never go back.

In 2006, boredom inspired her to give it another try, and she has since become very skilled, using Bikram Yoga as an outlet for energy and emotional release. Stuehrmann hopes to continue her study by becoming an instructor.

UMBC senior Jon Hart was introduced to Bikram Yoga by his roommate last fall. The 22-year-old didn't like the harsh nature of the instructor, who expected him to be more flexible, since he is an athlete.

“She didn't seem to understand that I had a lot more weight on me than the average person there,” says Hart.

While Hart did take several classes, he has no plans to return, as he feels he can get a good workout in other ways.

Bikram advocates boast many health benefits. Garner lists increased flexibility, improved circulation, weight loss, increased stamina, removal of toxins, increased metabolism, lower stress and anxiety, and improved digestion as some of the improvements.

The average person loses three pounds of sweat during a class and at the very least can burn 600 calories, says Garner. Hart once wore a heart rate monitor during a class, and calculated that he burned 2200 calories.

Garner also thinks that Bikram Yoga is an appropriate form of exercise for anyone.

Garner has seen someone lose 60 pounds and has witnessed a woman with polio balance on a leg that she was once told she would never use by committing to Bikram Yoga.

Physical Therapist Assistant Cory Anderson agrees that exercising in heat can be very beneficial for those with circulatory problems, however, he suggests that it may be dangerous to individuals with cardiac problems.

Anderson is a big fan of yoga, and finds that practicing it is good for relaxing, stabilizing, and stretching the body.

Holly Wade, coordinator of group fitness and wellness for UREC, took a Bikram Yoga class in the summer and has mixed feelings about it.

Wade pulled a muscle in her back during the class, citing the heat as the culprit, as it makes you less aware of your body's limit. It took her nearly three weeks to feel back to normal.

Many of the health benefits that Garner lists are valid for all types of yoga, not just Bikram, says Wade.

While Wade can see the benefit of detoxifying the body through sweating, she says that Bikram Yoga would not be appropriate for older audiences, people with high blood pressure, weight problems, or pregnant women.

She urges those interested in trying Bikram Yoga to get a baseline fitness assessment and talk to a doctor before trying it.

To prepare for your first class, Garner suggests drinking a liter of water an hour before, and not eating anything two hours before. The closest studio to JMU is in Charlottesville.

Garner understands that not everyone will like Bikram Yoga, but he encourages people to try it three times before calling it quits.

“The first time you think, ‘its hot, its hot, its hot,’ the second time you just think, ‘its hard, it’s hard, it’s hard,’ and at the end of the third class, you think, ‘I can do this.’ ”