

Tense, out of shape? Try yoga

By Dave McCurdy

Didja ever see anybody swallow 22 feet of cotton to cure indigestion? Or teach something for a living - and yet not demand that predetermined fees be paid for his services?

Didja ever know anybody who subsisted entirely on beans, vegetables and fruits, and yet who possessed considerable physical strength and had never been sick in his life?

If not, then you've never met Yogi Vipin Bhatt, a 30-year-old art-history-professor-turned-yoga who is communicating the techniques of yoga to scores of interested Edmonton young people.

Vipin is totally dedicated to yoga, which he has practised all his life. Native of Bombay, he gave up teaching art history a few years ago to devote himself entirely to yoga.

Vipin claims that yoga is the "natural" way of achieving all-round health. He pulls no punches in his condemnation of methods used by western peoples in order to promote their own well-being.

"There are two major things wrong with the western way of life. First of all, people are continually after dollars, dollars, dollars. This creates tensions and hostilities that are both unnatural and harmful. Secondly, people are continually poisoning themselves with drugs, alcohol and tobacco. These things may help them temporarily, but in the end they are killers.

"But yoga," he continued, warming up to his topic, "is the natural way of achieving total health. It does not involve drugs of any kind, just physical and mental exercises that immeasurably aid the cause of personal well-being."

Yoga consists of five parts: yogic exercises, yogic breathing, relaxation, meditation and philosophy. Each part has a special role in promoting the welfare of the individual.

Yogic exercises are intended to help one achieve complete physical health. Compared to gymnastics, they are quite simple, although they may take some time to master. They are not tiring, but benefit the nervous system and blood circulation greatly. Vipin demonstrated a couple of exercises to me - one in which he crossed his legs and proceeded to lift himself up on his hands (see photo), and one in which he showed astounding

abdominal flexibility by lying down on the floor and lifting the lower part of his body, from the midsection down, a good three feet off the floor. This exercise, he said, helps develop the muscles of the back, abdomen and thigh.

"Yogic exercises are of great benefit to a person's physical health and conditioning," he claims. "They can cure nervousness and a variety of diseases and malaises, and also help a person lose weight."

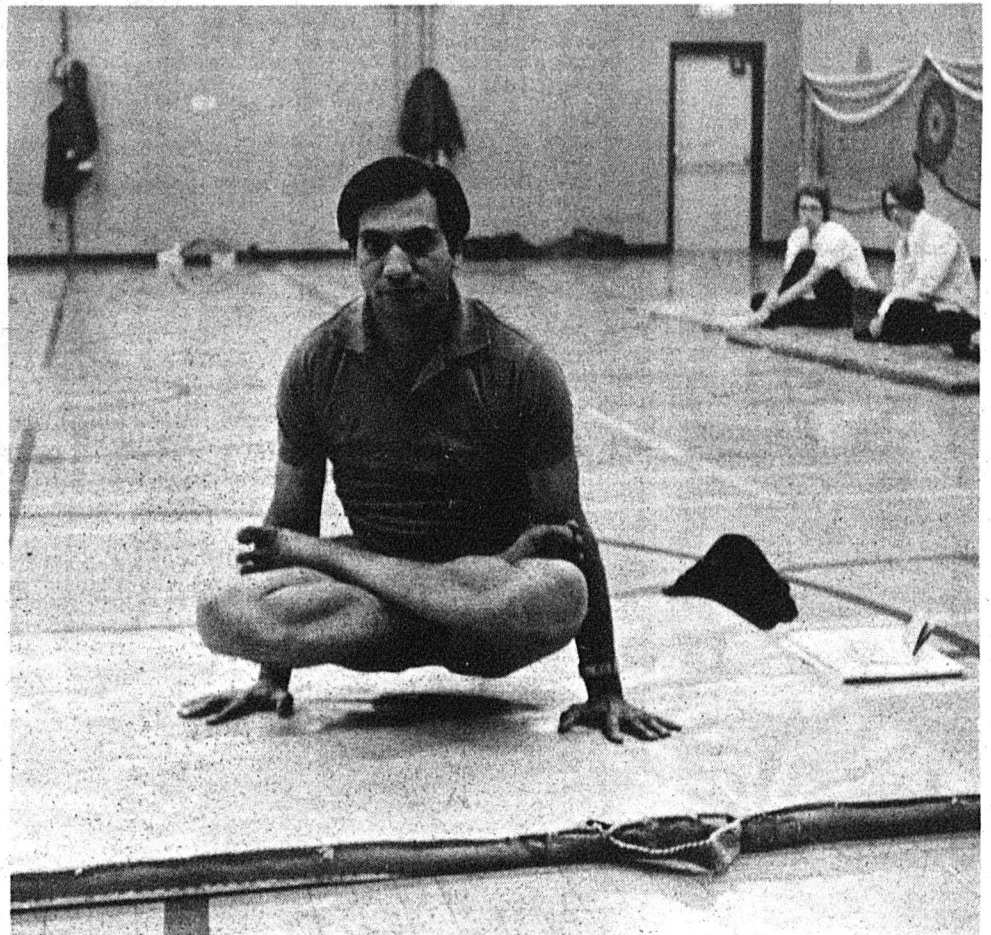
Yogic breathing, called pranayama, is concerned with aiding the respiratory and circulatory systems. Yogi Vipin says that yogic breathing has helped his lungs make better use of the oxygen they receive. Consequently, he not only can breathe more smoothly and less often than most people, but he can go underground or underwater for long periods of time.

Relaxation consists of techniques for relieving tension of many kinds in a short time. Our discussion of relaxation techniques led to a startling experience for me.

Vipin claimed that he could relax me considerably in about a minute by applying pressure to the tension points on my forehead. He told me to lie flat on my back; then, starting at the middle of my forehead, he pressed on my skull with his fingertips, heading outwards with each hand towards my temples, repeating the process several times. Yogi Vipin is not a very big man - about 5 feet 8 inches tall and about 1 - but the pressure he was able to exert on my head was simply enormous. I found that the technique worked - I felt relaxed, rather light-headed.

Vipin claims that due to the relaxation techniques he has mastered, a few minutes' relaxation for him is as good as two or three hours' sleep for most people. He generally gets by on five or six hours of sleep a night. "Also," he says, "other people have come to me saying that they feel tense or can't sleep, and that drugs don't help them; when I show them my techniques, they always come back a few weeks later saying that they feel much better."

Meditation, one of the best known aspects of yoga, is a complicated procedure which few can master. It is the state of awareness beyond relaxation where the meditator goes into a sort of trance and is eventually able to communicate with other worlds - a kind



of cosmic awareness which Vipin claims is impossible without yoga.

Vipin is a vegetarian who subsists mainly on organic, natural foods such as beans, fruits and vegetables. He believes that North Americans eat much more meat than necessary. "I don't say that everyone should become a vegetarian like me, but I do suggest that they cut down on the amount of meat they consume, for the animal fats and other ingredients found in meat can be harmful."

Another thing that North Americans do that is detrimental to their health is consume vast quantities of chocolate, potato chips and soft drinks. "Candy and soft drinks are terrible for your stomach," Vipin says. "Yet people are always drinking coke, coke, coke. It's no wonder they have indigestion and other stomach problems."

Many people, however, are beginning to see that yoga is a good way to keep your health. His classes consist of about 25-50 people each, and he teaches every night of the week, and even twice on some nights.

The classes consist of an exercise period of about one hour's duration (with the exercises becoming a little more involved each week), followed by a brief period of meditation during which the students, chanting in a low monotone in the dark, attempt to heighten their awareness.

Vipin gives a 100% guarantee of success for his techniques. The fee consists of a collection in the form of a collection taken at each class, to which one contributes as much as one is able to.

"If people don't have any money, it won't prevent them from taking the classes," says Vipin. "Anyone without

money can bring flowers or fruit, or distribute leaflets on yoga for me."

He seems to be having a considerable amount of success. Dan Reilly and Henry Soltysiak, two U of A students who attend one of his classes at McAuley School on Wednesday nights, are very enthused about yoga and plan to take it up as a way of life, as far as that's possible in western society.

The two have been practising yoga for about a month now. Reilly has been interested in meditation for some time, but it was Yogi Vipin's lecture at the university last month that really got them interested in yoga. They saw a good chance to learn yoga in these classes, so they signed up.

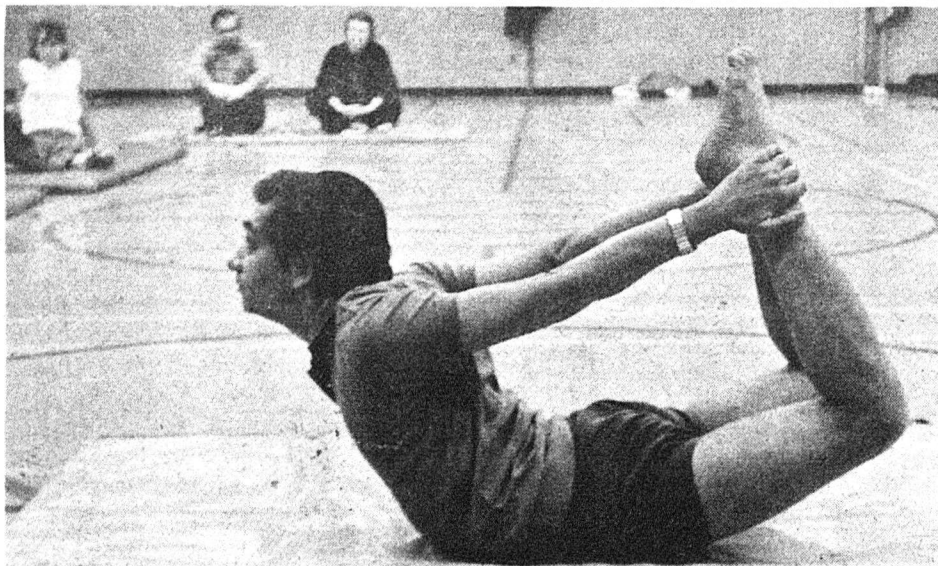
Every day they practise the techniques that Yogi Vipin teaches them in class. "It's best to do it on an empty stomach," says Reilly, "so I generally practise the first thing in the morning."

Both Reilly and Soltysiak have changed their diets since starting yoga. Reilly eats meat only when his sister, who occasionally cooks for him, puts it in front of him; Soltysiak has given up meat-eating altogether.

Is meditation a better high than dope? "Not yet," they say, "but we hope it soon will be. Also, dope is only temporary, but yoga can heighten your awareness at all times."

Are they finding that practising yoga is a strain in our pressure-cooker society? "Only a little bit," says Reilly. Soltysiak finds no strain at all.

So Yogi Vipin is having considerable success with this pair of yoga freaks at least. Vipin says that almost everybody he teaches is enthusiastic about the potential of yoga to help them. "I'm very optimistic about the future of yoga in Edmonton."



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