



sandy blaine



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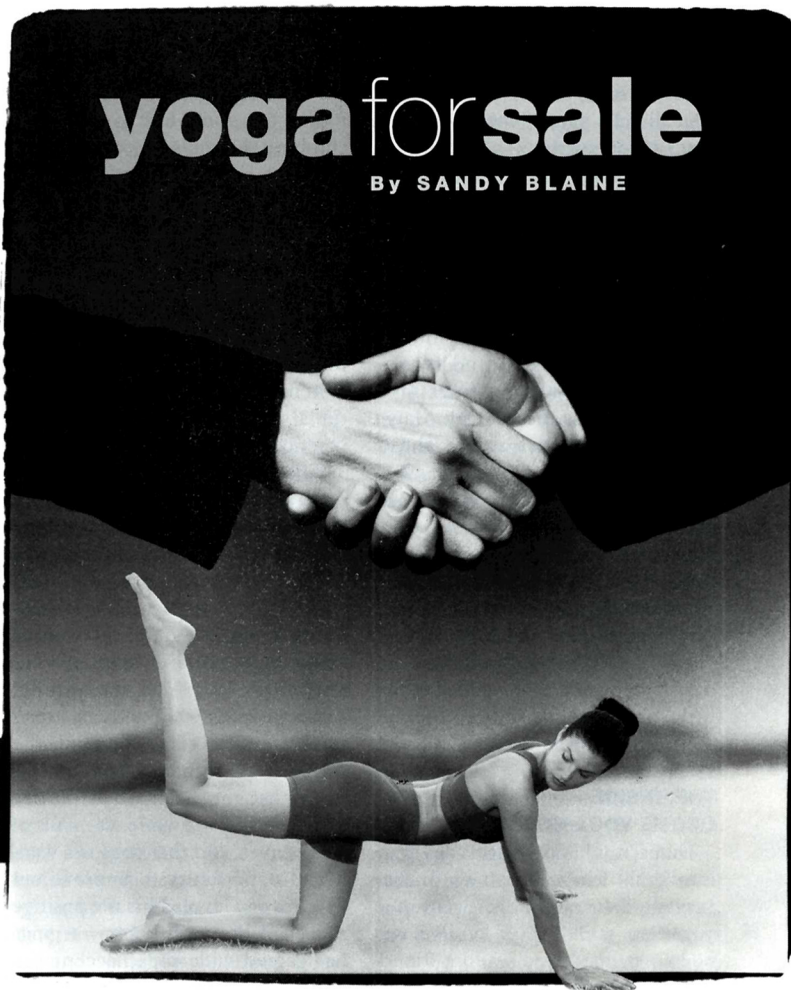
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A few years back Chrysler ran an ad for their Jeep Cherokee in *Scientific American* and *The New Yorker* (publications aimed not at an alternative audience by any means, but at the upscale market), assuming that these mainstream, upper-class, intellectual consumers would have enough awareness of yoga to get the joke: A page full of silhouetted figures doing yoga postures, with the name of the posture written below each figure, is captioned "The Eight Principal Postures for Achieving Relaxation and Self-Discovery." A closer look reveals that one of the figures is actually a seated driver; his "posture" is named "The Jeep Grand Cherokee." The text of the ad, in small print, begins: "Any journey of self-discovery starts by finding a quiet place. Inside a Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited, for example."

One of my yoga students brought this ad to class and I could see how clever it was. It also made me cringe. The suggestion that we can achieve the quiet awareness sought by yogis by buying an expensive car is about as far from the meaning and purpose of yoga as it is possible to get.

DIFFICULT CHOICES

As a professional yoga teacher I know I am not creating widespread social change through what I do, but my hope in making yoga my work is to lessen the harm I inflict on the Earth and to maximize the good I contribute to the lives of others. Here in the West, however, we are constantly faced with the



challenge of living in this society and truly adhering to the basic principles of social integrity, the *yamas*, which form the foundation of yoga. Georg Feuerstein, one of the foremost Western scholars of yoga, says that the yogic principle of non-greed is the most difficult for us, since excess and materialism are built into our culture. Every day we must make choices that involve us in greed, excess, and the exploitation and plundering of the Earth—our economy and social structure depend on it. For me these choices have become even more difficult as yoga has emerged as a full-blown trend. I know it is uncomfortable to think about this but I believe it is important that we as Western yoga practitioners develop as much awareness as possible of the issues that surround the choices we are making.

In many ways I am extremely lucky. Yoga has given me the opportunity to follow my bliss and do what I love for a living. But since my spiritual path also provides my livelihood, I come up against value conflicts and difficult choices every day. I am grateful for the opportunity to spread

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my vision of how yoga can enrich our culture and our individual lives. At the same time, I am deeply troubled by how commercialized yoga has become. Hypocritical? Well perhaps, since I am also, at least in a small way, part of the phenomenon I object to.

As teaching yoga has become a popular profession and a lucrative business, it has also become exploitable. *Time* magazine once called EST "the McDonald's of meditation." Yoga has been distorted in a similar way, as gyms offer "yogaerobics" classes, and weekend "teacher-training programs" spring up across the country. Many people who participate in these classes and programs don't even realize that yoga is more than an asana—that, in fact, asana is a minuscule part of the yoga tradition. America has a history of appropriating the sacred traditional practices of other cultures, and as yoga has become popular here, it has been turned into a product for widespread consumption in our profit-driven society.

THE UPSIDE OF THE YOGA BOOM

Given my history with yoga it is ironic that I have become a purist. It was a fluke that I ever went to a yoga class at all. I could hardly have been less interested when a friend dragged me to her Iyengar-style class; its challenges and joys were a complete surprise. I was instantly hooked, joining the droves of people who began practicing yoga in the late '80s. I didn't know then that I was riding the crest of a wave, that I was part of a trend that would culminate in Madonna espousing yoga on television talk shows.

Like so many others in the West, I began to practice yoga for its health and fitness benefits, and the deeper practice followed naturally. I doubt if it would have happened for me any other way; had someone tried to push "Eastern" thinking on me, I would have recoiled. It was a

slow, internal process, a growing awareness, the cumulative effects of regular asana practice that awakened my interest in spirituality. The first time I was in a class where the teacher began with a long meditation period, I was inwardly climbing the walls—I couldn't wait to get to the "fun part," the challenging, energizing backbends that I came for. Twelve years later this experience has been completely reversed: meditation feels like the whole point of my asana practice, and the physical work simply primes my body and my nervous system. I look forward to the continual, natural deepening of my practice throughout my life.

Since this has been my experience and since it has been such a tremendous blessing in my life, I can't completely discount the value of the current "yoga workout" trend. As a teacher who sees hundreds of yoga students each week, I have observed that a spiritual connection develops on its own for some people, while others aren't interested in going beyond the physical. I think either way is fine—that the health benefits are valid and worthwhile in and of themselves, and that yoga is a wonderful opportunity to improve our lives on any level. This is a positive aspect of the yoga boom—as yoga has gained widespread acceptance and recognition, its benefits are available to a growing number of people. I am one of the beneficiaries. But even with this perspective, and being relatively new to yoga, I see that yoga's move into the mainstream comes at a high price.

THE BUSINESS OF YOGA

After about five years of diligent study I began getting offers to teach, and suddenly in 1993 I found that I was a yoga teacher. Not only could I support myself financially by teaching, I also loved sharing the joys and benefits of yoga with others. Then shortly

after I had made the switch to teaching full-time, I was invited to be a partner in a new yoga studio, and in 1995 my partners and I opened the Alameda Yoga Station. Suddenly I was a business owner as well, and one of the many new entrepreneurs capitalizing on yoga's newfound popularity. But in my new role as a small-scale yoga capitalist, I found myself caught in a paradox.

I feel good about my commitment to yoga, about offering greater health and well-being to my students, and about treading relatively lightly upon the Earth in that my business is small, low-tech, and community-based. I don't feel so good about what I do, however, when I receive catalogs in the mail advertising endless "yoga-related" products. They are extremely appealing, and yet they embarrass me. I get tempting fashion catalogs in the mail too, and the "yoga" catalogs seem no different—even the models look the same. They are selling a fantasy that you can enjoy a particular way of life if you plop down your credit card. But we don't need to buy things to live a more spiritually pure life or to hasten our journey toward enlightenment. We don't need a \$400 indoor fountain to enhance our meditation experience with the peaceful, "natural" sound of trickling water. Yoga and meditation do not require any cash outlay. All we need is the ability to concentrate the mind and turn our attention inward.

These catalogs and their confusing messages are a clear indication that yoga has become so trendy that it is now an industry all its own. There are hundreds of yoga studios and thousands of yoga classes available at health clubs and gyms throughout the country. There are scores of yoga vacations and retreat centers, and yoga teacher-training programs are offered everywhere. There are numerous catalogs devoted to yoga equipment and yoga-related products. In



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addition to magazines like this one that focus on yoga, many mainstream magazines have covered the topic, including fitness magazines, women's fashion magazines, "new age" magazines, and even straightforward news magazines reporting on current social trends. There are countless yoga books and videos, some featuring movie stars. Fortunes are being made by selling yoga in various forms. The average

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person has no idea that asana and yoga are not synonymous or that yoga is being packaged by the press in a way that is easy to understand (and sell), not in a way that is accurate.

LOOKING BENEATH THE SURFACE

When I was in college at Berkeley I took several courses that looked critically at popular culture and social controls. In one such class, I remember the enthusiastic and well-informed young professor saying, in his introductory lecture on Western domination and exploitation of the Third World, "It is easy to live our comfortable lives here and not to think about this very much." He said this to a room full of undergraduates who mostly had never thought about it at all. "And it is even easier to think that this process doesn't involve you directly," he continued. "But it does. Every time you flip a light switch or squeeze toothpaste onto your toothbrush you are participat-

ing in a system that thrives on social injustice." I was stunned to hear this simple truth. It has haunted me ever since.

My Berkeley education trained me to look past the seduction of advertising to find the actual, ideological messages being sent. And even though I am far from immune to enticing messages, I do understand that every time I buy a product I am also buying a fantasy. Just as certain clothing catalogs sell overpriced khaki pants along with the fantasy that I, too, can be American royalty in their clothes, when I buy a cute exercise outfit from a yoga catalog I am buying into a fantasy about yoga rather than practicing yoga. I don't think that these are harmless fantasies, especially when we are buying without the awareness that we are being seduced.

One recent yoga catalog proclaimed that its products help people live life "in the way that really matters." This implies that there is a utopian existence—healthy, wholesome, stress-free—that is enjoyed by the caring, spiritually connected, upper-middle-class people who buy their products. They attempt to create the illusion that their customers are living simply, aligned with the Eastern world and its spiritual values, and somehow removed from mainstream, materialistic American society. This fantasy is a clever and ironic ideological trap: we are seduced into thinking we are living a spiritually pure existence when we are actually supporting values antithetical to authentic yoga.

AFTER THE HOOPLA AND HYPE

Yoga and numerous other alternative ideas found their way into American culture through the 1960s counterculture movement; many of these "radical" ideas became popular and entered the mainstream in the '70s and '80s as enterprising people saw their potential as money-makers. In

commodifying a spiritual philosophy that carries a message of non-materialism, that philosophy is not only stripped of its original meaning and power, it is also turned around on itself to reinforce the economic system and related values that it might otherwise call into question. Sadly, it seems that the most lasting lesson of the '60s was not that it is possible to bring about radical social change, but rather that even radical ideas can be lucrative. The dissenting voices don't need to be quelled when they can be co-opted for profit.

I know many yoga practitioners are troubled by these issues, and further, that we all must make our own choices. The cultural validation and the lure of wealth, fame, and other rewards that are the fruit of yoga's growing popularity are enticing—and they undercut yoga. The yoga boom is a trend, and trends in American popular culture are notoriously short-lived. This particular trend may not yet have reached its peak, but when it does the movie stars and the media will move on.

When they do there will still be those of us, probably in greater numbers than before, who want to make yoga the center of our lives. And so as a community we need to give some thought to how we want it to be perceived by the mainstream, and where we want to be when we are considered passé and left on our own again. Most of all, we need to think about and try to preserve the true meaning of yoga in our own lives, removed from the hoopla and hype; we need to stay connected to the heart of the practice. It is only when it isn't trendy anymore that we will begin to see what yoga will become in the West. It's a dilemma: I just hope I will still be able to make a living.

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