

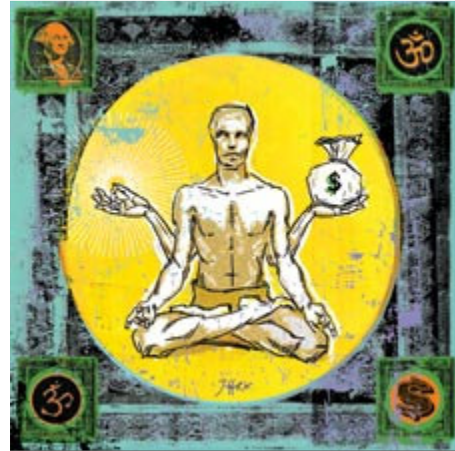


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Strange Bedfellows?

When spirit-centered yoga climbs into bed with business, there are bound to be fireworks

by Lisa Maria



At first glance, Rob Wrubel is about as normal looking as you can get. Dressed California-casual in a collared cotton shirt, khaki pants and brown leather sandals, it's not until you engage him in deeper conversation that you discover his obsession—an almost zealous commitment to bringing yoga to the masses. And yes, Wrubel and his business partner George Lichter intend to make some money doing it—despite the cries of “Blockbuster Yoga!” being shouted in their wake.

Following the extraordinary success of their education software company Knowledge Adventure and the online search engine Ask Jeeves!, Wrubel and Lichter began sifting through ideas for their next enterprise. They'd both dabbled in yoga and had somewhat crunchy, hippie backgrounds: Wrubel's family started the Nature Company in Berkeley, and Lichter is a former '60s counterculture guy who'd roughed it in an Alaskan cabin without running water. In 2002, inspired by the positive affects of yoga on their weary post-IPO bodies, they did a little research, ran some numbers and came up with a business plan.

Wrubel and Lichter created Whole Body, Inc. to spread the gospel of yoga and other mind-body practices, such as Tai Chi and Chi Gung. Backed by Highland Capital Partners, this all-star team's goal is to do for yoga what Whole Foods did for healthy eating. Talking over the background babble of Hungarian dance music and the whoosh of a cafe's cappuccino machine, Wrubel stresses his purpose: “As a society we're moving into this place where people need this. They desperately need an alternative to this crazy insane rush that we've put ourselves into with all the pressures and chaos of modern living.”

The first studios Whole Body, Inc. purchased were the two Yoga Works locations in Santa Monica, a school known for its masterful classes, intense management and star ancestry. The Yoga Works legacy can be traced through celebrity teachers Shiva Rea, Eric Schiffman, Ana Forrest, Brian Kest and Seane Corn. Former owners Chuck Miller and Maty Ezraty remain two of the country's top yoga teachers.

Hanging the weighty Yoga Works name on their business salutation, Wrubel and Lichter continued their acquisition of studios in LA, Orange County and New York, despite mounting suspicion from the yoga community. Coups include Ganga White's Center for Yoga (LA's first large yoga studio and birthplace of the popular Vinyasa Flow style of yoga) and Alan Finger's five Be Yoga studios in New York (set to relaunch this month as part of the Yoga Works family). Yoga Works' 14 studios now offer 1000 classes per week, with 250 instructors teaching 15,000 students a month.

One of the biggest criticisms that Yoga Works faces is the overwhelming fear that its big business mentality will dilute and destroy the practice of yoga. Taking a sip of green tea, Wrubel acknowledges the concern. “I set that up as the challenge. Students and people want authenticity. They don't want packaged, commoditization of experience... I think people now are mainly

interested in—not just an experience—but actual transformation of themselves.”

Sounds great. So what’s the problem?

Yoga Is More than Posturing

Nischala Joy Devi has been guiding people to transformation since the ’60s. During her 18 years as a monk, she taught extensively with her teacher, Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga. She was the primary teacher for Integral Yoga’s Teacher Training Program, developed the yoga portion of the Dean Ornish Program for Reversing Heart Disease and co-founded the award-winning Commonweal Cancer Help Program. She authored *The Healing Path of Yoga* (Three Rivers Press/Random House) and teaches worldwide.

A vibrant elder in the American yoga community, Nischala possesses a wide breadth of knowledge and experience. Her unique perspective offers insight into the uproar over Yoga Works. “We have to look at what we’re talking about when we talk about yoga. Call it asana (the Hindi word for the poses), don’t call it yoga! Once you start calling something yoga, you’re talking about a full, complete lifestyle. It’s how you eat, how you speak, how you dress, how you treat others, how you treat yourself, and mostly, your relationship with the highest. You can’t do yoga, you have to be yoga,” she proclaims adamantly. “Yoga is a lifestyle. It’s a way of being that leads us to our true self.”

In the US, the biggest barriers to yoga have been price and prejudice. To counter this, yoga has evolved into two models—gyms and studios. In the gym model, yoga is often taught by poorly trained instructors and emphasized as a workout, not a practice of self-realization. Here yoga is affordable and less intimidating, but often diluted and potentially injurious. In the studio model, students typically receive comprehensive, topnotch instruction, along with the awareness that yoga is a spiritual practice. However, studio rates are often triple the cost of a gym membership.

Wrubel intends to dissolve both barriers. “I’m a populist,” he asserts. “I don’t like worlds in which tremendous benefits are being held in the hands of a tiny group of affluent people. Students deserve great yoga and mind/body practices taught responsibly by motivated, well-compensated teachers. When I listen to people saying these awful things about building a larger company, I just play it back to them and say: ‘Wow, you’re saying you’d like this to be a self-serving, affluent practice for the wealthy in big rich cities.’ We want to solve this problem.”

Yoga Works has a multi-pronged approach to these issues. For one, they are working to make yoga more available through some insurance plans. Last November, Yoga Works launched a successful pilot program with PacifiCare (the country’s fourth largest HMO), which now covers yoga at two of their sites. Another solution is lowering prices at their studios. When they lowered prices at their Huntington Beach studio, they saw huge changes. Wrubel’s face splits into a big grin: “We dropped the price to \$55 a month from \$110 and the volume of the studio tripled. It was unbelievable. We had regular people coming in who now could afford to take yoga classes.”

Another looming question is how Yoga Works intends to blend the ostensibly opposing fields of yoga and business. All studio owners (and teachers) face this dilemma, but because of Yoga Works’ size and outsider status, they’re fielding a lot of criticism. Many of the qualities inherent to yoga—such as generosity, truth and community—directly oppose traditional American business practices of profit, spin and competition. Wrubel responds, “If you’re teaching the practice of yoga and there’s a set of implied values and principles about truth and nonviolence, all of the elements of that practice have to be woven into the way we practice our business. Right now, we’re working on what I think is most important for us, our values and commitments.”

One of the first things Wrubel and Lichter did was to open the company’s books to their teachers, even though they were strongly advised not to. “We reduced the amount of superstition or the kind of mistrust around finance. We said, ‘Look we’re going to be as honest as we possibly can.’ So

that's kind of how we weave the practice—continually bringing all the members of our community into this business-building and saying, 'What are the values of a place you would be proud to be a part of?' and trying to live by those values every day. I think it's the only way to build a company. If we can bring all that to the center, I think good people will solve it. But it's an active dialogue—just like your yoga practice!"

Wrubel uses sweeping hand gestures to punctuate his words and emphasize the meaning behind them: "You can't be everything you want to be. As much as I want to be able to jump into "Second Series" or do all the sitting poses in "First Series," I can't do it. I have these huge limits... I just have to acknowledge that and just live in that tension between too little and too much. The tension between commerce and creativity—that's a natural tension. If we can live responsibly in that place and have dialogues with respect and compassion, then we will create responsible new enterprises."

More than a Business

Tilting her head to one side, Nischala considers the idea of yoga as a business. 'When we start making it a business, we're counting heads. 'Maybe if I change it this way and teach [another] way, maybe I'll get more money.' My teacher, Swami Satchidananda, always said, 'Don't make it your business.' So all of our ashrams always had a health food store, or some kind of cottage industry, so we wouldn't compromise the teachings in any way."

Though Yoga Works is clearly a business, Wrubel believes a closer description would be a school. "I never use the word chain. I say, 'How would we create a large school that can serve a lot of people with highly trained teachers who are passionate about what they do, well-compensated for their skills and experience and are in a world of continuous learning—a great collegial environment—where most of the learning they are doing is with other teachers and senior teachers?' I think there are a lot of models. We've been creating a real faculty in the school where senior teachers are available to mentor young teachers—to help them understand all the things they've learned about the human body, classes, leading a class and managing your life as a teacher."

Nischala ponders the idea of a yoga school as she brushes her wavy, silver hair out of her eyes. "If you're starting a school, all aspects of yoga should be represented. There'd be classes on sutras, meditation, pranayama, ethics, vegetarian diet. Everything that yoga is would be included. And the teachers would be expected to also participate. It would be a great boost for the community."

Another criticism leveled at Yoga Works is their use of exclusivity contracts for their teachers. Wrubel clarifies, "We no longer have a policy that all instructors sign an exclusivity agreement with Yoga Works. In Santa Monica, at the studios formerly with the original owners, there was an exclusivity agreement for teachers who wanted to be exclusive with the studio. We have updated that policy for the teachers in Santa Monica. But we are not asking it of other teachers, say in Orange County or New York. It's the remainder of a policy for the Santa Monica teachers, not a company-wide policy."

He leans forward, the rays from the cafe skylight illuminating his blue eyes. "Our mission is to bring greater balance to the way people lead their lives. We're providing teachings and practices for people to make their lives more sustainable. They will lead longer, healthier, happier and more connected lives. Ultimately, if we do that, the communities in which they participate will be more sustainable. We think if you do that, then you really are in a sustainable world. Self-aware, connected human beings will do good things in the world."

When asked how he wants to be viewed by the yoga community, Wrubel leans back in his wicker chair, gently tapping his fingertips together. "Those weird, wacky guys created a strange movement, they solved the business stuff, they brought all these amazing passionate teachers into a place where they could all learn, and all the people that started to get touched by it started doing

good in the world. Suddenly this shift happened! They did it! And they paid everybody to do it!” He pauses, laughing, clearly delighted at the prospect. “They had a big social movement occur but it got paid for by the normal business techniques.”

As yoga continues to permeate the Western world, there’s little doubt that the lines between business and yoga, businessperson and yogi will continue to blur. It’s clear that in order for Yoga Works to truly succeed and be sustainable, they must continually embrace more yogic principles. And American yoga teachers will need to expand their business skills if they want to stay in business. With luck, each can learn from the other, become more powerfully integrated and not give in to fear. Now that’s yoga.

Lisa Maria is a freelance journalist who writes frequently about yoga.