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Yoga Is More Than Just Showing Up, but That Does Help

By NORA ISAACS

AFTER taking just a handful of yoga classes, Lisa Lew didn't know the plow from the plank and wasn't overly impressed with the age-old discipline. Still, she decided to tag along with a co-worker for the first day of a promotion at Levitate Yoga, a Manhattan studio, where students had committed to 21 consecutive days of yoga.

Ms. Lew, a 36-year-old administrator for an investment bank, sweated and stretched through three weeks of poses — all for a promotional price of $120. She fought aches and soreness, got stronger, and afterward she felt reborn: she lost waistline inches, but also shed stress and her tendency to overreact.

After reaping the benefits of a daily practice, she now heads to Levitate four times a week. "It brings a lot of peacefulness to me," Ms. Lew said.

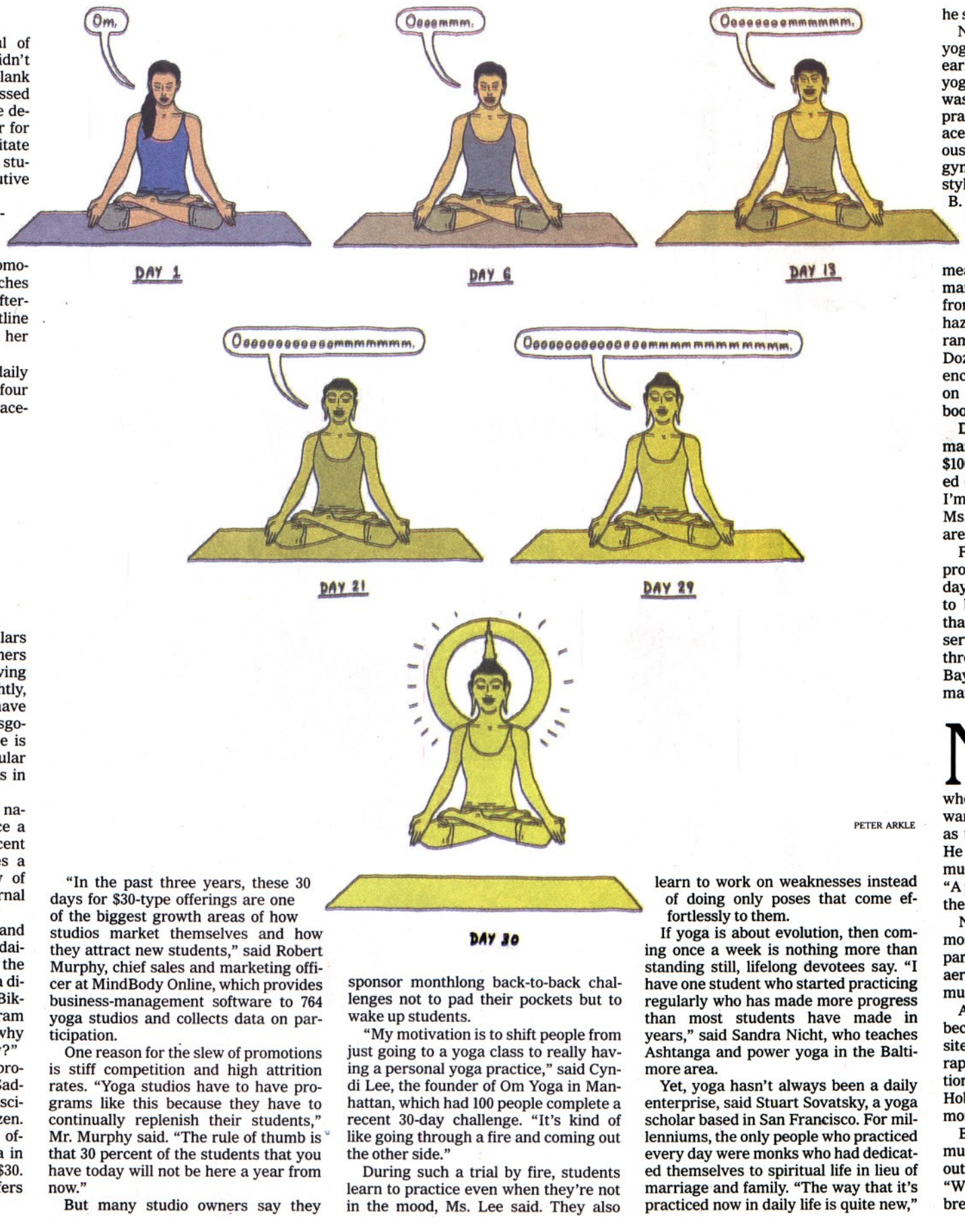
Enlightenment by the numbers, as in 30 days for $30.

As a way of creating loyal regulars out of monthly drop-ins, studio owners recently have pushed the self-serving idea that yoga is not to be done lightly, casually or sporadically. They have stopped short of telling erratic classgoers to give it up, but their message is loud and clear: committing to a regular practice is the only way to progress in life and on the mat.

Haphazard yogis are the norm nationwide: 25.7 percent practice once a week compared with the 8.7 percent who practice more than five times a week, according to a 2005 survey of 4,700 people conducted by Yoga Journal and Harris Interactive.

Some kinds of yoga like Ashtanga and Bikram have always recommended daily rigor. Referring to the creator of the latter discipline, Hope Wurdack, 47, a director for franchise operations of Bikram yoga in Los Angeles, said: "Bikram often says you eat every day; why wouldn't you do your yoga every day?"

But these days, get-committed promotions like Levitate Yoga's 21-day Sadhana (which means "spiritual discipline" in Sanskrit) are a dime a dozen. Funky Door Yoga in San Francisco offers 30 days for $29; Hot Spot Yoga in Crestwood, Ky., offers 30 days for $30. My Yoga Lounge in Sacramento offers 10 days for $10.



PETER ARKLE

"In the past three years, these 30 days for $30-type offerings are one of the biggest growth areas of how studios market themselves and how they attract new students," said Robert Murphy, chief sales and marketing officer at MindBody Online, which provides business-management software to 764 yoga studios and collects data on participation.

One reason for the slew of promotions is stiff competition and high attrition rates. "Yoga studios have to have programs like this because they have to continually replenish their students," Mr. Murphy said. "The rule of thumb is that 30 percent of the students that you have today will not be here a year from now."

But many studio owners say they sponsor monthlong back-to-back challenges not to pad their pockets but to wake up students.

"My motivation is to shift people from just going to a yoga class to really having a personal yoga practice," said Cyndi Lee, the founder of Om Yoga in Manhattan, which had 100 people complete a recent 30-day challenge. "It's kind of like going through a fire and coming out the other side."

During such a trial by fire, students learn to practice even when they're not in the mood, Ms. Lee said. They also learn to work on weaknesses instead of doing only poses that come effortlessly to them.

If yoga is about evolution, then coming once a week is nothing more than standing still, lifelong devotees say. "I have one student who started practicing regularly who has made more progress than most students have made in years," said Sandra Nicht, who teaches Ashtanga and power yoga in the Baltimore area.

Yet, yoga hasn't always been a daily enterprise, said Stuart Sovatsky, a yoga scholar based in San Francisco. For millenniums, the only people who practiced every day were monks who had dedicated themselves to spiritual life in lieu of marriage and family. "The way that it's practiced now in daily life is quite new," he said.

New is relative, of course. Everyday yoga started to gain momentum in the early 1900s, Mr. Sovatsky said, when a yoga teacher named Krishnamacharya was commissioned to create a fitness practice for the children in Mysore Palace in India. He came up with a vigorous style of yoga based on dance and gymnastics and ended up teaching this style to students like Pattabhi Jois and B. K. S. Iyengar, who would ultimately bring a form of this to the West.

Even if students stay loyal to a studio, it doesn't necessarily mean handsome profits. Tricia Neumann, 46, a horseback riding instructor from Earlysville, Va., was once a "haphazard yogi." A 30-day challenge at Bikram Yoga Charlottesville changed that. Dozens of people took part, and wrote encouraging notes to fellow participants on a large poster as if signing a yearbook.

Daily practice became Ms. Neumann's daily bread so much so that the $100 she now pays monthly for unlimited classes feels like a steal. "I feel like I'm really getting my money's worth," Ms. Neumann said. "I go so much, they aren't making any money on me."

For some in the industry, dirt-cheap promotions, especially those offering 30 days for $30, have a downside. "To me, to basically give it away for free like that, a dollar a class, devalues what the service is," said Joan Barnes, who owns three YogaStudios in the San Francisco Bay area. "We get what we pay for, ultimately."

NOT everyone agrees that daily yoga is necessarily a boon to health. Sal Fichera, an exercise physiologist in Manhattan who has had clients with yoga injuries, warns against it: "There is such a thing as too much of a good thing," he said. He believes that yoga every day is too much of a physical shock for beginners. "A person needs a day of rest to see how the body is adapting," he said.

Not to mention, Mr. Fichera said, most yoga doesn't encompass the four parameters necessary for total fitness: aerobics, flexibility, muscular strength, muscular endurance.

As much as studios nudge dabblers to become devotees, it can have the opposite effect. Jeffrey Vock, 45, a photographer, said that completing a promotion called 21 Club at Devotion Yoga in Hoboken, N.J., made him kinder and more aware of his aging body.

But ultimately, his yoga spree was too much. "I felt like I overdid it and came out feeling kind of sore," Mr. Vock said. "When I was done, I felt like I needed a break from yoga."