



Chapter I

Introduction: Confessions of a Bionic Yogini

It happens every time I give birth—to a new book, that is. I was all a-tingle. I know better. Talking about my projects before they're finished always causes trouble. Writing a book, working on a particular yoga pose, sewing a craft—whatever the task, talking about it, spilling the beans, always brings me some kind of grief. You know the feeling—an innocent, well-meaning remark from a relative or friend can pop the balloon of your excitement. Consequently, I decided to be quiet about my new project. In fact, this book was almost finished before I told my son that my next literary creation would be about yoga.

“Are you...?” He struggled for the right words: “Are you sure you have the credentials to write a book about yoga?” Oops! His face showed he'd realized too late that, no matter how he phrased it, he'd provoke a twinge from me.

Hang politeness, I thought. “Yeah, kid. I'm a yoga freak. How's *that* for credentials?”

My son has often heard me say how hard Bikram yoga is for me. He's heard me rail that I'm the *worst* in every class, and how some instructors loved me in spite of that, while

*Raw Food and Hot Yoga:
From Severe Disability to Superior Health*

others gave me a hard time. So wouldn't I be, in his mind, the last person who should be writing a book about yoga?

The same evening, since my new literary baby was almost ready, I "googled" the title to be sure no one else was using it. I didn't want to steal someone else's thunder. Cruising about the net, I found, courtesy of *YouTube*, "Shazzie." I knew very well who she was since I'd interviewed her for my earlier book *Beautiful On Raw*. I knew she was raw. I knew she was beautiful. Now I was looking at someone who's the very model of a raw food yogini. I believe you'll agree. Go ahead—spend a couple of minutes and take a look...go to www.youtube.com and run a search for "shazzie and yogini."

She's impressive. Yes, in the obvious, visual way any top-notch yoga practitioner is. So why don't I show you any videos of me doing yoga? Simple answer: I'm *not* the ultimate. Nor am I anything close.

In today's Bikram class, I took a critical look in the mirror at my poses. Just the day before I'd felt so proud of them. But now they looked pitiful. The fact is my poses take extra effort. Sometimes my poses take Herculean effort—and even then, the results aren't exactly textbook. There are many testimonials from people who had back pain, circulatory problems, joint problems, and many other ailments which have disappeared or have been ameliorated thanks to hot yoga. But I daresay very few people who begin to practice Bikram yoga have problems as severe as mine. Nothing is more stubborn than a childhood injury or a congenital physical defect.

I love yoga. I practice Bikram yoga every day. But with my hip limitations I will never be as good as Shazzie. So who am I to talk about the connection between raw food and yoga? What *are* my credentials?

Fact is, I do have advantages. Most people are entirely human. Not me. I'm special. I'm the Bionic Super-Raw-Vegan. I'm 15 percent weapons-grade titanium—the result of two artificial hips. And, come to think of it, I'm 15 percent immortal.

It's a strange life. Walk through an airport scanner and I light up every machine for yards around. Bored security personnel rise from their semi-slumber. German shepherds leashed in nearby back rooms begin to twitch. Homeland Security goes to DEFCON 4. While they're busy frisking me, my husband Nick smuggles all our raw food through security. He's bulging with organically grown coconuts, mangoes, and plantains. Don't ask me where he conceals them.

We have a saying in Russia...When a person can't seem to do anything right with her hands, we say: *Her hands grow from the wrong place*. Okay—it doesn't translate so well in English. But then, neither do I at times. My *legs* grow from the wrong place. It had to be—during my hip replacement surgery, my shiny new titanium components were positioned where existing bone structure allowed, not where they're supposed to be on you entirely mortal humans.

My doctors told me I'd never be able to stand on one leg, my balance being forever impaired. I'd never be able to bend more than 90 degrees at the hip. And I'd definitely have a "bad back," said the doctors, because of the severe limp I'd endured for more than 40 years of my life. "Go watch *General Hospital*," I told them. (Other phrasings came to mind. But this one seemed gentler.) I canceled my health insurance and started attending Bikram yoga.

I've experienced a good measure of dismay to go with the joy. My achievements in Bikram yoga are as great as the distance from here to the moon, but there is still so little to

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From Severe Disability to Superior Health*

show for all that effort. The distance from severe disability to normal average is astronomically greater than from normal to competition perfect. Frankly, there have been times in my yoga career, as I've compared effort to results, that I'd just as soon have trashed my book manuscript than publish it.

Let's be clear about what you're getting here. This is *not* another book of directions on how to achieve correct yoga poses. There's just no need for that. You'll find hundreds of yoga books that teach fundamental asanas. You definitely do not want a 15 percent titanium woman teaching you how to do yoga poses—some poses I still can't do correctly at all. As you have come to expect from me, I'm off on an entirely different tangent. *This book will do something no other yoga book has done.* My aim...to inspire you as no one has before.

If you've tried yoga and failed, or if you've only thought about doing yoga, this book will get you off your butt *doing* it. Forget how inflexible, how unfit, how imperfect you are, or how the initial wave of negativity discouraged you. We'll make it together. Believe me: If *I* can...you *definitely* can. In addition, I'll tell you how to avoid being intimidated by perfectly demonstrated poses performed by perfect bodies. I will also teach you how to survive the demands of those instructors who insist that the poses be done exactly the right way.

I will *not* repeat the benefits of hot yoga discussed in other books. Be sure you read Bikram's two books *Bikram's Beginning Yoga Class* and *Bikram Yoga: The Guru Behind Hot Yoga Shows the Way to Radiant Health and Personal Fulfillment*. I will give you a different prospective on hot yoga practice, one that has never been discussed before in print—beginners and veterans alike will find something new.

If you've read my other books, you know I bare my soul on every page. In this book, I've bared even more. Down, guys, down! No, not my body, but, more particularly, my artificial hips.

I even have pictures of my X-rays, incorporated into the cover of the book. It wasn't easy to let the whole world know about my problem, to show myself so open, so imperfect, so vulnerable. But I did it with one simple purpose in mind: to inspire *you*. I did it to strip you of all your defenses, to take away all your excuses, and to silence all your moans and complaints. I have made myself vulnerable, so you can become powerful.

"Start by doing what's necessary, then what's possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible."

—St. Francis of Assisi

That's the reason I set up a whole new section on my website called *My Yoga Experience* (check it out at www.beautifulonraw.com). Here you can read about my triumphs and failures, my joys and pains. You can also see my poses as I became better and more confident—not to show how good I am, but to help you realize how much better *you* can be.

For beginners, perfection is discouraging: For encouragement's sake, you need someone like me to relate to as you make your first steps. I hope my book will be that resource for you. Few people are better than Shazzie at yoga. Few people have more limitations in doing yoga than I do. Everyone else falls somewhere in between. And in that discrepancy is both a void and an opportunity. All yoga books are written by the masters—not by the challenged. So, yes, I've definitely found a nice, irregular hole for my unique peg. Well, there you have it—my credentials for writing this book. My weakness is my strength.

*Raw Food and Hot Yoga:
From Severe Disability to Superior Health*

I always warn the instructors before each class about my hip issues to keep them from having cardiac arrest from the sheer horror of my limitations. Most of the time, I am the most challenged student in a class. But there was one time when I was in a class with a person who struggled with postures even more than I did. The lady had advanced multiple sclerosis, and every pose demanded a heroic effort on her part.

My heart went out to her. I did my best to concentrate on my own postures and to avoid even looking in her direction. The last thing she needed was to feel from me anything that might have come across as pity. Later I realized something surprising: after more than 1500 Bikram sessions, this class had been my best ever!

Could it be that I was showing off on *her* behalf? I felt momentarily disgusted with myself as the possibility crossed my mind. No, it wasn't that! It was something different. I'd gone through the entire 90 minutes of practice, if you will, in a state of grace. I felt infinitely grateful for my body, with all its imperfections and limitations. No demands. No complaints. No expectations. I felt the sheer joy of having the blessed body I was given. This woman was the catalyst.

She made me concentrate on what I do have instead of what I lack and helped me use it to the best of my abilities. The result—the best practice ever. Her presence was somehow essential for me to feel good and grateful about my own body, a body about which I'd often felt wretched. This experience led me to a powerful realization: Could it be that my presence in a class produces the same effect on other people?

Many times in the past, other yoga students told me what an inspiration I was. I would thank them, but feel embarrassed. Now, for the first time, I was experiencing how it felt to be on the receiving end. Every one of us has a place. Sure, beautiful yoga models arouse our admiration for their

bodies and their capabilities. But someone like this woman, someone like me, can make others feel good about *their* own bodies. And that's a great place to be.

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

We can really only encourage those who are *better* off than we are. If you are very good in yoga, you are an example for many people who are less skilled than you, but the progress of someone with greater limitations—someone like me, someone like the lady with multiple sclerosis—is an inspiration to almost everyone. I believe, I just may have the capacity to bring more people to yoga, and to Bikram yoga in particular, than any “normal” instructor could hope.

If I can do yoga with titanium hip joints, how much more can you do? And if one day you become as good as Shazzie because I encouraged you to take up yoga and believe in yourself, and because Shazzie has shown the possibilities are endless, we'll have both fulfilled our missions.

“What we hope ever to do with ease, we must learn first to do with diligence.”

—Samuel Johnson

I receive lots of emails from grateful people who say they've started taking hot yoga classes because of my books. If you are among them, do write me and tell your story. I'd love to include some of your testimonials in my newsletter. Remember...in essence, *you* are “my credentials.” Don't be a stranger, let me hear from you!