

# Yogamerica Two

## Yoga Bob's Pandemic of Poses

John Centofanti and Robert Barton

## Chapter 1

Civilization in Pittsburgh continued into its second week of quarantine. Yoga Bob's studio, Three Rivers Yoga, was closed indefinitely due to the spread of the virus. The Governor ordered non-essential businesses to close and yoga studios were specifically identified on this list.

Apart from not travelling to his studio to teach, not going to Rea's Restaurant for pancakes and bacon, and not drinking draft Stella's on Wednesday night at Carmody's Grille on Neville Island, Yoga Bob's routine remained relatively unchanged.

"I haven't had two weeks off in thirty years, John," he told me happily as I walked into his cottage through the creaky screen door. His place was connected by a breezeway porch to an adjacent cottage. His only neighbor had taken the opportunity to vacate the premises and be with family during the quarantine, so Yoga Bob had the entire forest to himself.

The cottage was tucked into the wooded hills of Sewickley Heights, Pennsylvania. "*The Andy Griffith Show*" flickered on his television as I sat down for our work session. We agreed that two hermits visiting each other in the middle of nowhere didn't violate social distancing rules, especially since we had antiseptic in the form of cold beer.

Yoga Bob was enjoying his time off despite the calamity that had struck the rest of the planet. His countenance was a stark contrast to the pale, frantic people at the grocery store, the confused kids from Generation Z, the folks with pre-existing health conditions, and the rest of the bored, trapped world.

"Yoga can help," he told me as we sat down nearly six feet apart. I cracked open a can of cheap American light. "The mighty oak falls in the storm. The pliable willow bends and returns," Yoga Bob began as he popped the cap off a Spaten German lager.

We decided to use this time to start a new book, all while maybe helping his students. Our plan was to offer the chapters for free as we developed them, posting them on the studio website.

Although yoga was never far from his mind, “asana,” practicing yoga poses, was on the back-burner. For the immediate future, he was basking in a physical rejuvenation. He always practiced while he taught, normally an hour and a half to three hours per day, six days a week. He’d been at that schedule for a very long time.

“So, has the coronavirus killed your practice?” he smiled.

“Very funny,” I responded, unsure if coronavirus jokes were socially acceptable. “No, my home practice has been keeping me relatively sane. How about the rest of your students? What are you hearing?”

He heard from Ellen, a teacher at his studio and his unofficial office manager. Many students were hungry for videos and online classes. “We just posted several YouTube videos on the website and Ellen is hosting a Yoga Nidra class online this Wednesday. Now is the time to work on that lone practice.”

“I am used to working from home, but for a lot of people this isolation is disorienting. What should we do? How should we schedule our practice now that all the yoga studios are closed?”

“Leave your mat out. Don’t worry about formality or structure. Do some cat and cow poses. Do some vinyasas and sun salutes. While you’re in the kitchen getting meals ready, maybe do some forward bends or triangle pose. Informal moments, not long sessions. At least at first.”

“What about boosting the immune system or strengthening the lungs? Can we use yoga to help ward off this illness?” I asked him. “Your buddy, Andrei Siderski, attributed his yoga practice to fending

off the effects of radiation near Chernobyl. How can yoga help strengthen us?”

“Simple. Don’t stress. Don’t stress the lungs with some new practice to set it off balance. Don’t stress the mind with worry. I think a breathing practice is important. It’s probably more difficult to cultivate than an asana practice. Do whatever feels right. Practice some poses and practice some breathing. Just a little bit of discipline. Just a little bit of effort. Maybe ten minutes, maybe all day. You will be rewarded!”

Yoga Bob had switched over to a news report while we talked. The horrible pandemic death count flickered in red in front of our eyes. The solemn face of the reporter was replaced by a colorful Skittles candy commercial. A giraffe was nibbling on a chewy rainbow and this smiling Jamaican Rastafarian guy was milking Skittles from the giraffe into a bucket. We both burst out laughing.

“Ya mon!” Yoga Bob hollered, raising his Spaten in a toast. “We’ve got to maintain our sense of humor through this. That is critical. Do what you can do. Let the rest take care of itself.”

“So many people are working from home now. It’s like a marathon of conference calls. Do you see any benefit in doing some poses while working?”

“No,” he told me flatly. “Keep business separate from ‘blissness.’ Work when you work, practice when you practice. The constant for each, though, is the breath. You can certainly be more mindful of your breathing while working. That is critical.”

Yoga Bob got up from his Lazyboy and shuffled over to his little bookshelf. He sorted around, muttering to himself until he found what he was looking for. He returned to his chair and handed me the artifact. It was hardly a book at all, more like a glossy program you might get if you went to the theatre.

“This looks interesting,” I told him as I marveled at my next assignment. It was titled, “The Eye of Revelation” by Peter Kelder. The front cover had a cartoonish, sixties feel to it with a semi-circle eye looking up into the heavens as it rose from a lotus flower.

“Copyright 1939. What is this?”

“Only the Fountain of Youth,” he smiled. “Take it home. Give it a try. With only five poses, this is something anyone can do.”

I read an excerpt out loud. “According to Colonel Bradford, these ‘Five Tibetan Rites of Rejuvenation’ stem the tide of premature old age as they stimulate the flow of human vital energy.”

As nature began her bloom into Spring while we were all sequestered at home, maybe a little rejuvenation was exactly what I needed.

## Chapter 2

A few days later, Yoga Bob stopped over to sit on my back deck and enjoy the warm, late March sun. The quarantine continued so we agreed to sit six feet apart while we discussed world affairs in the fresh Spring air.

“You know, John, social distancing used to be my lifestyle. Now everybody’s doing it!” he chuckled. Clearly a trend-setter, everyone was now dressing like Yoga Bob as well. Today he had on a Steelers sweatshirt with matching sweatpants.

I had been working on the “Five Tibetan Rites of Rejuvenation” since I’d last seen him. My family even joined in. Few of the strange practices and routines I had brought home from Yoga Bob were as simple and easy as this. Add in the guarantee of the Fountain of Youth and it was certainly worth a try.

Yoga Bob provided me with an accompanying hardcover that was a more in-depth study of the history and background of the rites called “Ancient Secret to the Fountain of Youth – Book 2.” It was a compilation by the original author of Book 1, “The Eye of the Revelation,” by Peter Kelder. This was a companion book that delved more deeply into the history and mystery of the rites.

They were called “rites” by the Tibetan Lamas thousands of years ago. In our terms, they are more like poses or exercises. There was nothing religious or mystical about them at all, at least on the surface. The five poses were to be practiced daily and took literally less than ten minutes to complete. The Five Rites are as follows:

1. Stand and hold arms outstretched like a “T” then slowly spin from left to right, clockwise, three times.
2. Lie on your back, arms stretched straight down by your sides, then raise your legs up into the air and bring your head up and forward as well. Then return to lying flat. Do this three times. Be careful on your lower back on

this one. Until you build up strength, maybe bend your knees or place your hands below your sacrum as you raise your legs up.

3. Kneel and arch backwards, hands on hips, similar to Camel Pose. Then return and bring the chin towards the chest. Do this three times.
4. Sit with legs straight and hands on the floor by your hips. Tilt your head back while thrusting the torso upwards, like Reverse Table Pose. Do this three times.
5. Finally, do Downward Facing Dog and Upward Facing Dog three times.

Between each rite, stand tall with hands on hips and take two deep breaths. Yoga Bob called this “akimbo” stance, like from old-fashioned calisthenics.

So, the overall routine is simple. Stand at akimbo, take two deep breaths, then do three of Rite #1. Then back to akimbo, taking two deep breaths. Then Rite #2, and so on. Each week add three additional repetitions of each rite. By the seventh week, you will be doing twenty-one of each rite.

Yoga Bob and I did all five of the rites on the back porch in less than ten minutes. “They don’t seem to be very strenuous. How could this be the Fountain of Youth?” I asked him as we sat back down on the wicker couches.

“You read the booklet, right? They describe spinning energy centers, vortices, in the body, like ‘chakras.’ As we age, these energy centers slow down, get blocked, or spin out of balance with the others. This, they say, is the cause of aging.”

I nodded. Even after only two days of doing the poses, it seemed like I had more energy. I certainly had a better outlook about the quarantine.

“Proceed slowly, though. When you start working with energy like this, slow and steady is best. Gradually, the energy will build. Trust me, by the time you are doing twenty-one of each of these poses, you will definitely feel the energy.”

Yoga Bob described that he had integrated these rites into his overall practice years ago. Upon waking, he would first do some quiet sitting meditation. Then he would do the rites. Later, he would teach a class or two like he does now. To finish his day, he would do an additional set of the rites, followed by sitting meditation, then sleep.

“That schedule sounds very ascetic. What happened?”

“I lived that way for many years. Then I got married and bought a house. I traded in the Five Rites for a tractor and a huge lawn. Since we’ve been discussing it, though, I’ve decided to renew this practice. It rapidly creates or amplifies an enormous amount of energy.”

I started “Book 2” and was quickly drawn in. It was a compilation of authors and stories focused on the culture and longevity of the people of Tibet, and the history of the rites, yoga, and meditation. Then it told tales that bordered on the supernatural. The authors shared mesmerizing stories of monks living to be hundreds of years old, all the while hidden from the rest of the world in this closed society.

One story told of a monk who appeared to be thirty years old but was actually ninety. He spent most of his time fasting and ate very little. When asked if this was his secret to being so healthy, he replied, “No. It’s being free from the poisons of fear, worry, and anxiety that keeps me young.”

In other stories, monks walked across water, could materialize out of thin air, and of course, dry icy wet blankets draped over them in winter, merely with the power of their breath.

“We’re talking about energy again, John. It’s all around us, but when you talk about it in mixed company, people look at you like you’re crazy,” he laughed, shaking his head. “There is gravity, sunlight, nervous, muscular, and mental energies. You can’t really even see sunlight when you stop and think about it.”

“What about the chakras and spinning energy vortexes?”

“Remember from our first book: yoga is about experience, not belief. The Five Rites might hold some magical, mystical power. Maybe they are just more yoga, reminding us to breath and move, with intention and regularity. Maybe they are designed to slow us down, if even for a few minutes. Once you get to that place of stillness, everything is energy.”

## Chapter 3

Yoga Bob beamed radiantly when I asked how he was holding up with the isolation of the quarantine. The extended stay-at-home period was causing anxiety, depression, and cabin fever among many of my friends and family. Yoga Bob wasn't just coping, he was basking.

“My body feels tremendous from this break. I'm sleeping better. I get to play drums all day if I want to. I'm finally living the life of a true hermit!”

He hadn't taught a class in nearly a month. I worried that the alternative ending to our first book was coming true: Yoga Bob's complete renunciation of yoga, vowing never to practice again. It would have been a perfect ending, but highly improbable in reality. His first name was Yoga, after all.

“I am still practicing, but I'm not on my mat teaching three hours a day. Now I get to do the poses I want to do. The one's I enjoy.”

“Like sitting in a LazyBoy recliner?”

He laughed, but didn't take the bait. “I love teaching, but the true joy is in the practice itself.” He smiled as we sat, not in recliners but in folding lawn chairs in my garage. I had the bay door open and, after a mock attempt at measurement, we sat six feet apart. An early April wind chilled the air despite the bright sun.

Spotify played in the background from the garage speaker. Yoga Bob requested the Al Green channel. A deep-souled, “Take Me to the River,” strummed on in the background. I honestly thought Talking Heads wrote that song.

“I've really been enjoying the Five Tibetans. Got any new poses for this chapter?” I inquired.

“Try this one,” he said. “I call it the ‘Internal Health Exercise.’”

We rose from our lawn chairs. Yoga Bob stood with feet a little wider than shoulder distance. He bent his knees slightly and held his hands out in front of him, elbows bent, like an outlaw cowboy who’s drawn both six-shooters. I followed his lead.

“It’s more like a Tai Chi ball,” he countered, holding an imaginary soccer ball out from his belly. “Now, take a breath. Feel your feet on the ground. Get centered. Get grounded. Inhale and extend your right arm straight up, palm to the ceiling. Now extend your left arm down and behind your left hip, palm to the floor. Gaze down at your left heel. It should flow, right arm up and left arm down, as one fluid motion with your inhale.”

“Then exhale back to holding the Tai Chi energy ball. Next, inhale and do the other side. Left arm up, right arm down. Gaze down towards your right heel. Now back to the Tai Chi ball, exhale. This is a great stretch for the entire body, especially the sciatica.”

My lower back had been bothering me from too much sitting. Or maybe it was from shoveling a mountain of mulch. It also might have been Rite #2 of the Five Tibetans. That leg lift can be rough on the lower back if you don’t take it easy and bend your knees.

“This pose has completely relieved my back pain. Amazing! It is kind of like Tai Chi.”

“I learned it from a book on Chinese energetic movements. This is the first pose I teach in Taoist yoga. It’s easy to learn, easy to do, and has tremendous benefits.”

“The secret to the pose, to all poses really, is gravity. It’s all about gravity. Push down into the ground with your feet when you are doing it. By pushing into gravity, rather than fighting against it, you become lighter. Try it. Stand in Mountain Pose.”

We stood there, staring out from my garage into the back yard, looking weird. “Root your body, then using the thighs, push down into the ground as you stand in Tadasana.”

Mountain Pose, Tadasana, is basically just standing with good posture: arms at your side, back straight, shoulders back, head held high. Standing tall. Breathing. Despite any real motion, it can be very energetic. There is strength in the pose, the magical force of gravity holding you to the planet.

“As you press down into the ground, there is a rebound: an energetic wave, like a bounce,” he told me. “If you just drop a ball, putting no energy into it, it doesn’t bounce very high. If you slam it onto the ground, there is a tremendous rebound.”

I had never thought of gravity this way, that there could be a reverse reaction to the constant pull. “This is the complete opposite view of my understanding of gravity. It defies all scientific theory,” I chuckled at him, amazed.

Yoga Bob loved that. He held a mild disdain toward Western science, part of his life-long rebellion against authority. Perhaps a long-held grudge dating back to middle school science class. “Gravity is not some illusion,” he told me. “It’s everywhere, but where is it? Scientists don’t know.”

Continuing to stand in Mountain Pose, he mused that he was now submerged into the ground up to his thighs. The visualization was hilarious as he struggled to pull his legs back out of the imaginary quick sand. “Asana, the poses, are all gravitational experiments. Now that’s science.”

We sat back down in our lawn chairs and sipped our coffees. Rea’s Restaurant, with their bottomless cups of coffee, was closed except for takeout. Our bacon and pancake consumption had plummeted, but coffee continued to flow, just not our favorite.

“Did I ever tell you about Vanda Scaravelli?”

“No, I would definitely remember the name ‘Vanda.’”

“She wrote a famous yoga book called, ‘Awakening the Spine.’ She taught and practiced energetically, well into her late eighties. One of her students told me that Vanda would have them stand in Mountain Pose for twenty minutes, sometimes longer.”

“You should try that, once the studio opens again.”

“They’d all walk out,” he smiled. “Vanda described yoga as ‘an effortless dance with breath and gravity.’ You should read ‘Awakening the Spine,’” he said, smiling. Effortlessly, the next chapter materialized in front of our eyes.

## Chapter 4

“How hard is this quarantine really? Look around, we’ve got all this space, plenty of food. Mostly enough toilet paper,” Yoga Bob ranted.

“Think about the poor souls in prison. They don’t even have a room this big,” he exclaimed, jutting out his arms from his LazyBoy. I sat in the chair next to him in the living room of his cottage, watching a rerun of the Cleveland Browns versus the New York Jets from 2017. I already knew the Browns had zero wins and sixteen losses that year.

“What about people who travel all the time? Or people who normally work sixty hours a week and are now trapped in their homes. What’s your message? Words of wisdom from a drumming yoga hermit?”

“Well, for the married ones like you, I’d say ‘til death do you part,” he laughed. “However,” he said more slyly, “it seems to me, though I might be wrong, people who sit in very small rooms for a very long time must learn an awful lot about themselves.”

I considered his premise. “You’re comparing our current situation to a prison? Being quarantined is basically the same as being held prisoner.”

“What is it that we have been avoiding all these years? The hustle and bustle, travel, entertainment, iPhones, the internet. These are all distractions. What are we avoiding? Can’t we stand ourselves?” he laughed again, doubling over in his chair.

We were three or four weeks into the isolation. I was starting to lose track. Yoga Bob remained refreshed and glowing from his time off from teaching, but he did love his job. Even he was starting to get the itch. Yoga Bob was becoming “Patient Zero”: the first hermit to contract cabin fever from social distancing.

A few days earlier, Yoga Bob and I took a short road trip to the studio, just across the river in Coraopolis. Our goal was to retrieve Vanda Scaravelli's book. We arrived through the ghost town into the quiet space of Three Rivers Yoga.

While he rummaged through dusty old boxes in the far back room, I stood and looked around in the center of the studio. It felt like a thousand years since I had practiced here, like I was visiting my elementary school decades later.

Yoga Bob continued digging, all while talking to himself about how the book should be there. "That's not it, not this one, not there, hmm. Well, John, I must have loaned it out."

Instead he handed me a stack of three old, worn books. The front cover of the first one, "Yoga Helps," pictured a man meditating in a field of white flowers. He had long brown hair, a matching beard that Jesus would be proud of, eyes softly closed as he sat peacefully in Lotus position, shirtless and wearing what appeared to be surfer shorts.

I raised an eyebrow, skeptically, as I skimmed through the book from 1978. He reminded me of Jeff Spicoli from "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" and resembled Duane Allman of The Allman Brothers Band.

"That's Doug Swenson. He's a legend," he told me. Years earlier, I spent many hours doing "Ashtanga" yoga with my David Swenson video and matching spiral-bound book.

"Doug is David's older brother. Check it out," Yoga Bob told me as he turned out the lights and locked up the building. Our chapter on Vanda would have to wait.

That night, a tremendous thunderstorm rolled through. The wind not only woke me. Soon, I was bartering with the Lord for protection. Electrical outages were widespread. Fortunately, we were spared. I awoke to a house intact and equipped with fresh coffee.

My wife, Erin, and I spent several hours cleaning up the wreckage in the yard, mainly sticks and debris. I remarked to Yoga Bob later that it was like four hours of forward bends. By early afternoon, cleanup nearly completed, my cell phone buzzed. It was the beer drinking yoga guy.

“Hey mon,” he greeted me sheepishly. I could tell by his tone that something was up.

“Ya mon! What’s up, Bob?”

“You got electricity? Mine’s been out since last night.”

“Come on over. Hot food, hot coffee, cold beer.”

As it turned out, Yoga Bob had cooked up a batch of turkey vegetable soup the day before. There was enough for the entire household. He was thankful to hang out, charge up his phone, and drink hot Tim Horton’s coffee. We were glad for the entertainment.

We had our lunch, sat in the hot April sun drinking coffees, and tried to talk about anything but the coronavirus. My pack of Shih Tzus and a Lhasa Apso wore themselves out as they vied for Yoga Bob’s attention.

The day rolled on and happy hour arrived early. Yoga Bob shared countless tales of his early days in Sewickley. When he was in the Boy Scouts, his troop would camp just over the rise from where we sat. Later, as he grew into his teens, he worked at Isaly’s, the old deli and dairy store famous for Klondike bars and towering ice cream cones called “Skyscrapers.” I wondered if their chipped chopped ham was the gateway to his love of bacon.

His stories meandered to his days working at a funeral home. “Ahh, I remember the day I picked up my first body...” his eyes twinkled, wistfully. Forgetting his audience, he shared grotesque details of his work. Was it the weeks of social distancing or was it just

Yoga Bob? I tried to gently steer the conversation, but his record player needle got stuck in a scratch on the vinyl. Erin recused herself.

“Way to go!” I laughed at him.

“What? Did I say something?” he joined in.

Later, we ordered dinner from GoodFellas DraftHouse: rubeens, rachels, salads, and fries. Picking up the food was difficult for me, emotionally. I could see the open barstools from outside the window, beckoning, as I received two bags of food at my car.

We finished our meals and reclined to the family room. I invited Yoga Bob to stay for a while and watch a movie. Having given me so many assignments over the years, he had neglected the one I assigned him. Remaining skeptical until I pushed play, “Austin Powers in Goldmember” proved to be just what the doctor ordered for the quarantine blues. He had never seen any of the movies in the trilogy, despite my prodding.

I haven’t laughed that hard in at least three or four weeks, probably years. We howled at Doctor Evil, Mini Me, and of course, Fat Bastard. It was magical. After the movie, still laughing, he headed home. Much to his delight, the luxury of electricity awaited him.

The next day, back at his cottage, we sipped beers and continued our enjoyment of the NFL football rerun. “This quarantine, it’s a circumstance not of our choice. We are stuck with it. What can we do with it? Will we look back and see it as an opportunity?” he asked me.

Amidst the seriousness of the quarantine, Yoga Bob and Austin Powers reminded me of the importance of laughter. In lightness there is joy, compassion, and maybe even wisdom. This is something worth striving for.

We both agreed that losing our sense of humor would be far more deadly than the virus. Therefore, the pose for this chapter is laughter. There's no right or wrong way to do it.

## Chapter 5

The lockdown continued as we neared the beginning of May. The Spring's weather was cooler than normal, turning the few days of warm sunshine into cherished commodities in Pittsburgh. Daily walks became a soothing balm for restless quarantined minds. Previously empty parks, trails, and streets were now endless parades of walkers, quietly trekking through forests and neighborhoods.

I shared an article with Yoga Bob titled "This is Your Brain on Silence," by Daniel A. Gross from a website called "Pocket." The story discussed how Finland discovered that their quiet way of life, more closely tied to nature, could be marketed to tourists. They identified silence as a resource.

"Researchers now know that noise is a probable source of illness," I told him. "Noise pollution causes the body to produce the stress hormone cortisol, leading to a host of diseases."

I was sitting next to the now symbiotic "Yoga Bob/LazyBoy" creature. They, the chair and he, still detached from each other regularly, but as the quarantine dragged on, they were melding into a single organism.

"Just a few minutes of silence reduced people's stress levels, even more than listening to relaxing music. When exposed to silence, not only did people's memory improve, they even grew new brain cells! Yet even in silence, our default mental mode is one of constant scanning, calculating, and evaluating. Most of our brain's energy is consumed when we do this."

He looked on and nodded, listening and considering.

"Focused attention, on the other hand, reduced this default-mode. By adding focus to silence, optimum mental performance can be achieved. At least that's what the article says."

“Reminds me of ‘Kirtan.’” he brightened. “When you are chanting mantras, the focus is incredible. That definitely stops the mental scanning.” Yoga Bob had been supporting chanters everywhere since the eighties, although there isn’t much chanting at his studio.

He could see my uneasiness at the thought of singing with friends and strangers. It took me back to those chorus concerts when I was in third grade. Back when my voice was beautiful. Angelic, even. Puberty was a cruel thief.

“John, you have no idea. Imagine chanting a mantra over and over for twenty minutes. It sets up a breathing rhythm, it seems like every cell in your body starts to vibrate. When it stops,” he paused for effect, his eyebrows raised, eyes wide, “you drop into this energetic space of pure silence. It’s truly amazing. I think it’s because of the contrast.”

I brought Yoga Bob a short story from a book that fell off my shelf recently called “Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui,” translated by J.C. Cleary. The story, called “Silent Illumination,” would fit nicely into our discussion of silence, or so I thought. I read it aloud to the Yoga Bob/chair creature. It looked on intently, smiling.

“Old Pang said, ‘Just resolve to empty all that exists: don’t make real all that doesn’t exist.’”

Yoga Bob’s eyebrows scrunched a bit. The chair came forward, lifting him up, as he prepared for discussion.

“The master exclaimed that there were shaven-headed outsiders whose eyes were not clear. They were teaching people to ‘stop and rest and play dead,’ to keep the mind still and to forget feelings. They called this ‘silent illumination.’ The master argued that being unaware and unknowing was like becoming earth, wood, tile, or stone. This was not unknowing, he said.”

Yoga Bob's contented smile was now a sardonic grin. "Well of course, John, how can he be a teacher without his way being the way!"

I should have seen it coming but was too focused on the Zen master's gibberish. It was an exercise in authority, Yoga Bob's nemesis.

"That's about control," he fumed. "This system, that system. That's the kind of teacher I don't want to be. Fit into *your* body. Where are you in *your* life? Is the perfect pose for Mr. Iyengar the perfect pose for you?"

I smiled calmly, not making any sudden movements. "How do you teach that? How do you teach everyone to do it their own way?"

"Easy. I count on the fact that they're not listening," he said as we both burst out laughing. "There are many paths that lead to the top of the mountain. When you get to the top, the views unite."

The chair gently eased him up onto his feet as he prepared to demonstrate. "Many systems, like Tai Chi versus Chi Kung. The 'Internal Health Exercise' is actually not Tai Chi as we discussed. Health exercises tend to be Chi Kung. Tai Chi is a martial art. Two systems, similar poses and movements."

He stood with legs slightly bent, feet pointed out, arms out in front of him like a ball room dancer who didn't realize he was dancing alone. "This is called, 'Embracing the Moon.'"

"Seems like holding your arms out like that would become challenging very quickly."

"How about this one?" Now he held his arms up, hands spread, palms toward the ceiling, as he gazed up. He looked like he was trying to hold up the ceiling.

"It's called 'Holding Up the Heavens.' It's a Chi Kung exercise."

Yoga Bob chuckled when I asked him how much of a difference there was between Tai Chi and Chi Kung. “It’s all Chinese yoga, Taoist yoga, just different names. Eventually, every pose will feel the same, full of energy and grace. With a little focus and a little silence, who knows what a person could accomplish? It just takes a little practice.”

## Chapter 6

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, Yoga Bob was back on his mat. This was the day our Governor allowed Allegheny County to move into the “green phase.” Restaurants and yoga studios could finally get back to business, although it was not business as usual.

I was absent for many of these initial classes because of a remodeling project. I worked long hours alongside several friends, including a carpenter, helping to complete the work over the course of three weeks. Disappointed by the timing, I wanted to get back to the studio.

The three-month closure of society had taken a toll on me and I was anxious to get back out into the world, but the remodeling needed to get done. “The working man is the happy man,” Yoga Bob quoted Ben Franklin. “The idle man is the miserable man.”

I countered with an Egyptian proverb I found on Google. “The mouth of a happy man is filled with beer!”

He agreed as we enjoyed our breakfast at Rea’s Restaurant after class. It had been a season since we’d eaten in. Yoga Bob ordered nearly everything on the menu including a BLT with egg, coleslaw, and soup. I got the giant “number three” breakfast of scrambled eggs, Mancini’s toast, home fries, and bacon, plus I added on a pancake. We feasted like kings as we chugged our hot coffees. My body already began to groan in pain from over-eating.

“Everybody’s lives have changed, mon,” Yoga Bob told me after his plates had been licked clean, his silverware neatly stacked. “After three months, we all have new habits, new rituals, maybe even new beliefs.”

“How are things at the studio?” I had only been to a few classes since he had reopened, but noticed that attendance was down.

“Seems a little light but the weather has been nice, people are probably out doing yardwork or vacationing?”

His face darkened. “This is worse. You’re right, summer tends to be slower, but I think many people are just not coming out.”

“It’s all habits, Bob. Everyone has developed new behavioral habits.” I read him some notes I had taken on the subject. “A habit is a settled or regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up.”

Yoga Bob laughed, “Yes, John, an object at rest tends to remain at rest.”

“Furthermore,” I continued, “in as little as eighteen days, and on average in just sixty-six days, you can turn a new behavior into a habit.”

Yoga Bob considered this and nodded. Everyone had developed new habits over the course of ninety-days in lockdown. I found, once the studio reopened, that it took energy to get to class. It took some amount of motivation, especially since I had settled into a groove with my home practice.

“Maybe stillness has become a habit?” Yoga Bob wondered. “The end of the lockdown could serve as a springboard to new habits, though. Maybe better habits.”

“I feel sorry for your Lazyboy recliner. It must be lonely now that you are back teaching.”

“I’m a socially-distant urban hermit.”

“Have you heard from any of your students who aren’t coming out?” I asked him. There were many of the regular gang that I hadn’t seen since March who still remained absent.

“It’s sad, but because many of my students are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, they are continuing to avoid public spaces and unfortunately, this includes the yoga studio. A few have said they won’t return until there’s a vaccine. There is so much fear in the world now. It’s truly a shame.”

The conversation continued down a dark path, ending up at a place we call “the elephant in the room,” politics. We agreed to keep that out of our yoga book.

“Just remember,” he told me, “flags divide us. They create sides.”

“Just tell me I’m special, Bob. Tell me that we all get trophies,” I said causing a chuckle. “That reminds me,” I told him. “I’ve got a good quote for you from the ‘Dhammapada – The Sayings of the Buddha.’”

Yoga Bob lightened, loving the wisdom of ancient texts.

I read from my notebook after my coffee cup was refilled for the fourth time:

*“The winner sows hatred*

*Because the loser suffers.*

*Let go of winning and losing*

*And find joy.”*

He smiled faintly as we looked out onto the sidewalk and street from our little booth. There were the haves and the have nots, the young and old, the black and white. Glancing to the television mounted in the corner of the restaurant, the local news showed the world mired in division and negativity like too many bad habits it couldn’t kick.

There is an action we can take, though, a counterpose to the media's poison pills. It's as simple as a few deep breaths. Through yoga, there is action that brings union into our lives and those around us. Imagine it, a practice that generates peace, on demand. That seems like a habit worth pursuing.