



A healthy mind, a healthy body, a joyous life,
flow from an open heart.

BY KATIE O'CONNELL

Hemalayaa Behl says she used to watch her father practice yoga while she was growing up. He began to teach his young daughter in an effort to get her to harness concentration. "It was sort of his remedy on how to get me to focus," she says. Hemalayaa, who goes professionally by her first name, did more than fall for her father's trick to get her to study—she turned it into a career. The 36-year-old Ojai, Calif., resident and Toronto, Canada, native teaches yoga in Los Angeles and offers workshops and retreats around the world.

Hemalayaa incorporates elements of classical Indian dances in her yoga, the result of her father's approach (including chant and sound vibration) and Indian culture's traditional dance styles. She has also released a number of DVDs that showcase her approach to the discipline of yoga, such as *Yoga for Everyone*. Not surprisingly, her DVDs feature traditional and modern Indian dance, particularly that of Northern India from where

her parents originate. Such titles include the *Dance of the Kama Sutra* and the Bollywood Dance Series: *The Bollywood Dance Workout*, *Bollywood Booty* and *Bollywood Burn*, all of which feature Bhangra dance. "The bouncing of the shoulders and the hands out," Hemalayaa says, are the style's distinctive features.

Hemalayaa emphasized that she feels the combination of yoga, a practice that focuses on the structure of breath, and the spontaneity of dance are complementary. "They seem awfully different, but putting them together feels so natural," she says, adding that she believes even the most experienced yoga practitioners should try to incorporate some dance into their style. "They might find it a healthy break from their normal routine." She mixes a few other unique features into both her yoga and dance workouts including fluttering of the lips, rotation of her wrists, and sticking out the tongue. "This is actually something my father taught me," she says. "Fluttering of the lips is a really

great stress releaser [and] yogis say that the tongue muscles actually go all the way down and are connected to the stomach. In the stomach, there is all the undigested stuff. Not just food, but emotions, situations, events and stresses that we have sort of pocketed into our hips and stomachs,” Hemalyaa explains. In an effort to release those stresses and find a place of peace, she promotes a loose fluidity in her yoga and dance workouts. That, combined with a sense of humor and a purposeful lack of rigidity and seriousness, are evidence of Hemalayaa’s trademark laid-back approach and playful spirit—particularly evident in her dance workouts. “It’s a wonderful way to relieve any stress in your life and really use the movement to do that.”

Hemalayaa encourages forgetting insecurities, not worrying about perfection and, most notably, having fun. “I’m not really a technical dancer,” she says. While she recognizes that her playful attitude helps people simply “let go,” she explains that her workouts are still exactly that, a workout. “They have all the elements of a fitness regimen. You do get a sweat and get to burn tons of calories,” she says, adding that her workouts promote cardio and strengthening. Nevertheless, she does her best to conceal that fact, and rather than refer to her DVDs as workouts, she prefers the term “playouts.” “It’s like having a party in your living room,” Hemalayaa says. While devoted to yoga and to dance, the 5-foot-3½-inch, 112-pound Hemalyaa says she has quite an aversion to gyms. “I don’t like exercising. I hate going to the gym. Why don’t we just have fun with [exercise]” she says. She wants people to achieve feelings similar to those of a child’s joy while playing. “Having that outlet to play and become a kid again gives us a break, even if it’s just for five minutes.”

Hemalayaa’s goal is not only to introduce others to her take on yoga, dance and the fusion of both practices, but she wants to shed light on a new way of looking at physical fitness and healthy living. “A healthy mind, a healthy body, a joyous life, flow from an open heart,” reads a quote on her Web site, and it’s also the guiding principal by which she lives her life.

Hemalayaa says she does 20 minutes of yoga before she even gets out of bed each morning; takes a walk every afternoon; and tries to do at least three days of dance per week. She drinks a tall glass of warm/hot water with a whole squeezed lemon each morning. “It’s an amazing thing to do,” she says, emphasizing that the practice rejuvenates the body. She eats a mostly vegetarian and organic, well-balanced diet filled with greens like kale, chard and spinach; fish protein; healthy fats and oils. “My motto is eating good food—organically grown [and sustainable]. If I’m going to eat animal products [they] have to be free range and taken care of in a clean way.” But she adds, “I also allow myself to have that chocolate cake when I want it.”

As for everyone else, Hemalayaa believes that trying to work out at least three times a week for 20 minutes is an ideal goal. “Do whatever you can. Don’t be harsh with yourself. Don’t be frustrated and give up,” she says, emphasizing that a healthy body and mind are interconnected and also quite complementary. AF

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