

## The Yoga Mogul



David La Spina for The New York Times

Friend (center) leads a mass warrior pose in Detroit in March.

By MIMI SWARTZ

Published: July 19, 2010

There is so much going on in John Friend's life right now that an assistant once teased him about waking just before dawn and calling to ask for coffee, only to be reminded that he, Friend, was in Quito, Munich or Seoul, while the assistant was back at home base in the Woodlands, a cushy suburb north of Houston. That Friend, the founder of Anusara, one of the world's fastest-growing styles of yoga, has an assistant is itself significant; many people still picture yogis as serene guys who live in respectable deprivation in places like Mysore or Pune, India, and wait for disciples to find them. Not Friend.

Consider one afternoon in early June when he had just left a meeting with potential investors in Seattle, having flown to the West Coast after several months of giving Anusara workshops in Tokyo, Taipei, Bali and Morrisville, N.C., and was making a brief stopover in the Woodlands on his way to teach more workshops in Copenhagen, Munich, Paris and Park City, Utah — stops on his "Melt Your Heart, Blow Your Mind Tour." Friend's modest, two-story faux Tudor home (filled with statues of Hindu gods, prayer flags and other souvenirs of his myriad travels) was a semimaelstrom of recently washed clothes, piled-up mail and stacks of unread publications with headlines like "Nine Life-Altering Lessons" — a reflection of the semimaelstrom that is his life.

## The Yoga Mogul

When Friend wasn't off leading workshops, he was helping plan the yoga-and-music Wanderlust festival to be held this week in Squaw Valley and the Anusara Grand Gathering in Estes Park, Colo., in September, the lead-in to Yoga Journal's annual weeklong conference featuring major American yoga teachers. "John brings in huge numbers," says Elana Maggal, conference director for Yoga Journal, the bible for practitioners. "In 2008, his was the largest yoga class ever held at our conference. We had 800 people all in one room. We had a waiting list of 200. Needless to say, we want to replicate that."

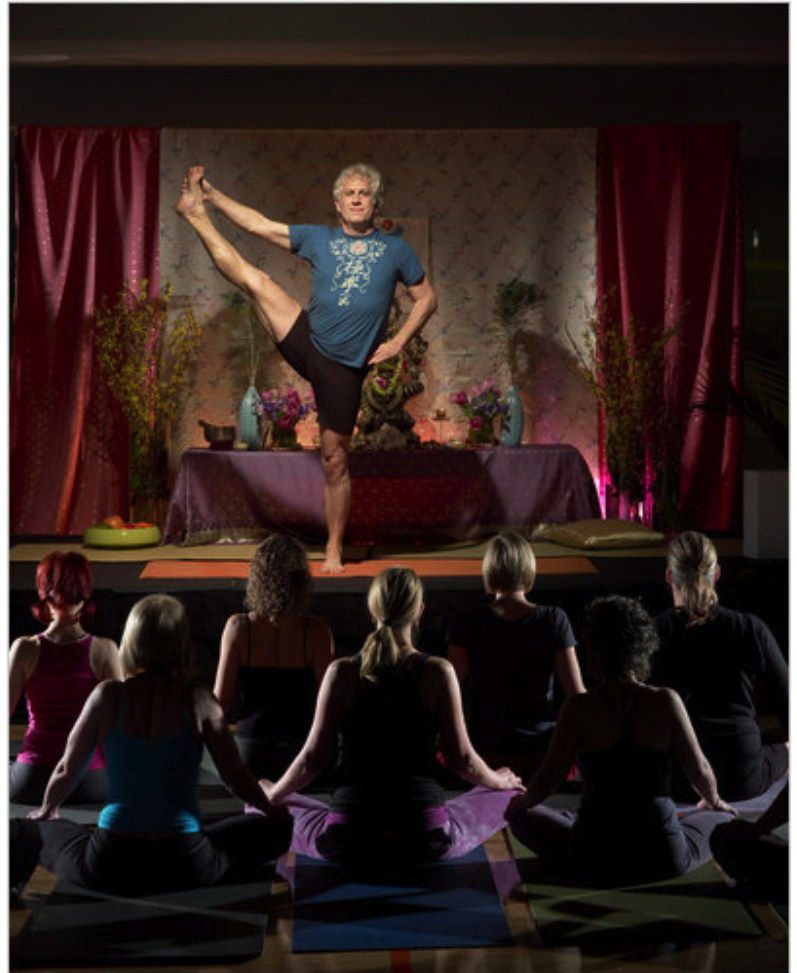
On the road and at home, Friend also keeps tabs on all the ancillary businesses he has created in the last 13 years, since Anusara was born: his global Anusara expansion (Studio Yoggy, one of the biggest yoga-school chains in Japan, will be offering Anusara yoga classes); his Anusara publishing ventures (he has commissioned a history of yoga and continues to work on his own book, albeit sporadically); and his Anusara yoga-wear business (Friend has his own line, but also works with Adidas, which is using Anusara yoga trainers in its worldwide yoga push). He is also financing historical yoga research in Nepal and Kashmir.

Simultaneously, Friend is trying to raise money for his most ambitious project to date, the Center, which he is planning to locate in meta-crunchy Encinitas, Calif. Friend expects the Center, with art, music and theater, in addition to yoga, to expand the Anusara "community" — his word — which currently includes 200,000 students in 70 countries and about 1,200 licensed-by-John-Friend teachers. In his downtime, Friend regularly sends Twitter messages to his 5,000 followers and to his 8,000 Facebook fans. But there is always more to do: during the 36 hours he spent at home, he taped his portion of a DVD titled "Titans of Yoga," in which he will appear with other American yogis like Shiva Rea and David Swenson. ("Namaste," he said, relaxed before the camera in a white linen shirt and khakis. "I'm John Friend, the founder of Anusara yoga. I've been practicing for 40 years. . . . Yoga is my life. It's not just something I practice on a sticky mat.")

Friend, buoyantly serene, settled himself into an overstuffed leather chair in his living room, while his assistant du jour, a willowy woman named Margaret, padded in and out, dispensing water

The New York Times

July 25, 2010



David La Spina for The New York Times

**BOSS POSE** Friend and his staff during a yoga workshop.

## The Yoga Mogul

and taking notes. “We were up till 3 a.m. last night,” he said, capping a recitation of all his on-the-fly planning. Friend rubbed his eyes and abandoned attempts to stifle yawns. It’s tiring being one of the most famous — and one of the most entrepreneurial — yogis on the planet. Friend, who is 51, has close-cropped curls that are snowy white; there is a significant crease between his slate blue eyes; and he is just a little doughy. Though he is frequently described as charismatic, he is a bit distracted in repose. But once he starts talking about Anusara, his boyish energy returns. You almost expect him to levitate.

Friend is not so much a conversationalist as a monologist, an occupational hazard of someone who urges hundreds of people at a time to bend, stretch and connect with “the extremely intelligent spirit within that is mind-blowingly revealing.” As he tried to sum up his creation, his eyes slipped out of focus as he zigged into tantric philosophy and zagged into Anusara’s metaphysical underpinnings — but that didn’t really get him where he wanted to go. He cited the “top scholars” who have helped him refine Anusara’s message. Then he talked about the freedom of Anusara; it’s nothing like the more rigid schools that demand students repeat the same poses in the same way at every single class, nor is it the kind of practice in which teachers withhold praise, lest students become too egocentric. “Anusara is positive,” Friend said, resting his head on the back of his chair and absently caressing one of many highly polished orbs on an adjacent table. “It’s accessible. Easily applicable. And yet it has depth and sophistication.”

Consider those religions that focus on sin and damnation, on discipline instead of joy. “Fundamentally they say no,” he told me. “While Anusara is a yes.”

Friend’s world was coming back into focus. His eyes became brighter, and his jet lag fell away, dissolved by this insight.

“We are,” Friend said, beaming, “the Yoga of Yes.”

The first time I encountered John Friend was at a workshop at a Woodlands community college nearly 10 years ago. At the time I was practicing a stricter form of yoga, and Friend’s joke-cracking and mind-boggling acrobatics — he is famous for his handstands — were something of a revelation. Yoga could be . . . fun? Friend’s assistants then were mostly middle-aged suburban women who had once been his students, and if the yoga was no easier than what I had been practicing, their touch and encouragement was both comforting and inspiring. Failing to execute a pose meant nothing more than that you might succeed next time. As Friend led us through the poses, he spoke in a soft voice, insisting that we contain divinity within ourselves and must discover and express our inner goodness to fulfill our obligation to better our world. How to do so was never expressly stated — except for practicing yoga, of course — but I left the workshop feeling better physically, mentally and emotionally.

I didn’t know at the time that this was my introduction to what others call “the cult of John.” If

## The Yoga Mogul

Friend could be compared with anyone outside the yoga world — and I am not sure he would like this comparison — it would be Joel Osteen, the magnetic evangelical megachurch minister with the feel-good message and a book-and-television empire. Osteen’s God is loving and forgiving. Osteen doesn’t get hung up on dogma, and thus everybody is welcome.

Similarly, Friend’s yoga is based on classic hatha-yoga postures — he has refined them using what he calls “universal principles of alignment” — but it can be as challenging as a student wants it to be. His classes are less about toned abs than about self-expression and enjoyment. (Adjustments don’t make the poses “right,” for instance, they make them “more beautiful.”) You don’t have to be a vegan to become an Anusaran, and unless you want to be an Anusara teacher, you don’t have to master complex texts. He uses just enough Sanskrit to be exotic without being incomprehensible. Friend’s “dharma talks” — short sermons — are based largely on simplified tantric principles (not, he stresses, the ones relating to tantric sex): students learn that they are divine beings, that goodness always lies within, that by opening to God’s will — opening to grace, Friend calls it — “you actually become vastly more powerful than the limited person that you usually identify with.” Instead of joining a megachurch, you join the Anusara kula, Sanskrit for family. Like Osteen, Friend has found a way to attract large numbers of people by softening the hard edges of a rigid ideal and by applying the full force of his personality to achieving that goal.

“He has created his own community very self-consciously,” says Stefanie Syman, the author of “The Subtle Body,” a new history of American yoga. “Most charismatic teachers do that. What happens is if you are successful deliberately or inadvertently, a lot of students evangelize on your behalf and spread the word.” Friend’s success also speaks to the dissolution of traditional communities. “People used to find community at their church or synagogue or club or league,” Syman notes. For some, yoga now serves that function. “Especially if you have an intense physical practice and are interested in transformation, you feel like you’ve lived through something with someone. You have an intimacy with them that you don’t have with anyone else.”

Certainly the fan letters I asked to see bore that idea out: “My experience at your conference altered my being,” wrote one student. “I drove through the mountains and stopped every few minutes to write about the dancing rivers and the aspen paving my way with liquid gold.” Another wrote, “This was the first time in a room of 200 people that I did not feel overwhelmed, out of place or somehow in the wrong room.”

Friend’s timing could not be better. Some 16 million Americans now practice yoga, a 5,000-year-old mental, physical and spiritual discipline brought to us by Indian gurus. Nowadays there aren’t just hourly classes in major American cities but also in places like Deephaven, Minn., and Hattiesburg, Miss. “Namaste,” the traditional end-of-class blessing, has become a punch line. A school in Houston even offers “jello shots” after class. If yoga began as a meditation technique for people all too familiar with physical as well as mental suffering — with poses, or asanas, devised to assist in reaching a transcendently blissful state — it has taken on a distinctly

## The Yoga Mogul

American cast. It has become much more about doing than being. More about happiness than meaning. It's a weight-loss technique and a stress-management tool, a gateway to an exploding market for workout clothes and equipment. Spending on yoga classes, books, clothes, Om amulets, mats and more has increased 87 percent since 2004, to \$5.7 billion a year. As yoga has developed a vigorous capitalistic side, traditionalists have expressed their dismay. "We need introspection, and this yoga" — commercialized yoga — "is not about introspection," says Judith Hanson Lasater, an author of eight yoga books and a founder of Yoga Journal. "We have a whole country full of restive people who are not contemplative. The idea of the asana is to calm you to prepare you to move at a human pace, not the pace of electrons on the computer."

Like many other small-stakes subcultures — the world of poetry, or academia, say — yoga has become embroiled in head-of-a-pin type arguments. In yoga's case it centers on authenticity. The fight over whether it is a spiritual or a physical practice has raged virtually since its inception, but now in the United States this question has been tinted with issues of competition, status and sweat. People who favor the demanding flow of Ashtanga yoga, for instance, might scoff at those who practice Iyengar yoga, which is slow-moving but stresses proper placement of the body in the poses. (Think of boot camp versus a classical ballet lesson.) Then again, serious meditators — those who revel in stillness and make pilgrimages to ashrams in India in search of yoga masters — disdain the spandex-clad 20-somethings who dash to hot-yoga class to burn off yesterday's cheeseburgers. For a yoga teacher, these debates spell opportunity: anyone whose technique takes off — or promises some sort of transformation, spiritual, physical or both — can become a star, supplementing the average yoga teacher's meager \$35,000 annual income with cash generated from workshops, lectures, books, clothing, DVDs.

Friend set out to build his brand by straddling yoga's two poles: he is trying to enhance yoga's spiritual aspects by training teachers to speak inspirationally as they teach their students to master the postures. In his teacher-training manual, Friend spends a great deal of time on philosophy and writes that the spiritual effects of yoga are more important than the physical ones. He expresses this aim in language that draws as much from Dale Carnegie and the American idiom of self-improvement as from Hindu philosophy. Teachers, he writes, should "lead the students to that magical place where everyone's heart opens naturally and where everyone feels empowered and filled with self love."

Friend, who has a degree in finance and accounting, has also corporatized the practice. Like all yoga stars, he's a road warrior, giving workshops as a way to drum up business. But Friend's niche is to be less exotic than some yogis while being more spiritual than the most commercial ones. He calls himself Anusara's general manager, as opposed to its guru. He doesn't wear a turban like some Kundalini yoga teachers, or his hair exceedingly long, like David Life, a founder of Jivamukti yoga. Nor does he define the spiritual aspects of yoga the way some schools do — he doesn't press students to embrace animal rights or to chant for extended periods. And he doesn't stick to the same sequence each time in class. On the other hand, Friend brings in

## The Yoga Mogul

enough spirituality and gentleness to differentiate himself from the hot and heavy yoga types, like the bandanna-wearing power-yoga creator, Baron Baptiste. Friend also would not be confused with the Indian master Bikram Choudhury, who created and franchised a kind of hot yoga, which stresses transformation through a rigid workout in a 100-plus-degree room, not through happy sermonettes. Friend's persona is that of an easygoing guy with an easygoing yoga — except when it comes to business. Friend is not above a little intrayoga competitive trash talk to make his point: People know about physically oriented yoga, he said, “but as we grow they are going to learn about Anusara. Then people can choose — either they are going to go to a fast-food joint or a fine restaurant.”

Not surprisingly, Friend's detractors — and there are at least as many as admirers — claim that he has watered down and commercialized a hallowed tradition for his own gain. Anusara Inc. currently has about \$2 million a year in revenue, though Friend says, “We spend as much as we bring in, so we have little profit.” An Anusara prospectus from the spring predicted that revenue could double by 2012. Friend is the sole stockholder in the company and pays himself a salary that is just under \$100,000 — a fortune in the yoga world. Friend, of course, is not ashamed to sell this new American cocktail of spirituality and exercise. How can people get the word unless he spreads it? “There's no differentiation between yoga philosophy and business philosophy,” he said of Anusara. “We honor spirit, based on our vision that life is good.”

He was in fine form last spring at a Melt Your Heart, Blow Your Mind workshop in Hollywood, where about 500 people, mostly young, mostly women and most of them spectacularly fit, paid around \$150 for three days of nonstop Anusara. The event was held in the ballroom of an Armenian cultural center on Vine Street, complete with a 5,000-square-foot stained-glass ceiling, which the hyperbolic Friend could not resist calling “the biggest, most beautiful stained-glass window in the world.” The stage featured pots of multicolored zinnias, along with statues of the Hindu gods Americans tend to favor: the elephant-trunked Ganesh, remover of obstacles; and Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and beauty. In an adjacent hallway, yoga books, Anusara T-shirts and DVDs, Hindu statuettes and Om refrigerator magnets were on sale.

Friend entered the room almost imperceptibly but was soon surrounded by his students, who giggled at his responses and were eager for his touch. (One sign that Friend, who is divorced, has reached rock-star yogi status: men and women press hotel-room keys into his hands at workshops.) Unlike many, more severe yoga masters, Friend worked the crowd like a contestant on “Last Comic Standing”: “Cool color!” he said, inspecting a student's polished toenails, or “Pray for him,” when he guided a student into a difficult pose. And for hours on end, he never stopped talking, seemingly without drawing breath, about the light that always follows the darkness, about being a better person than you were a year ago and about always, always, giving your all, on the mat and elsewhere. “Whatever you've got, you've got to rock it out fully,” he said in Los Angeles. “You've got to work the edge. The edge is so cool.”

## The Yoga Mogul

No one could ever accuse Friend of holding back. The final event of the Hollywood workshop was a laser light show. Everyone locked eyes on a far wall, oohing and ahing to undulating beams of bright green, yellow, red, orange and blue that supposedly reflected the flow of energy, or chakras, in our bodies. “Hey, John,” someone finally cracked. “Are you gonna put some Pink Floyd on?”

As much as Friend preaches the gospel of openness, he’s relatively guarded about the story of his own life. Like a lot of celebrities, he tells a version of his history from which he never deviates: his father, a former sportscaster and marketing executive, had economic troubles and so moved the family from the Rust Belt to Texas; his mother was an intellectually gifted Southern belle and a Juilliard graduate with a theatrical flair. Colleagues told me, and Friend concurred, that when his mother was ill — she died of cancer in 2002 — Friend, the older of two boys, strived to cheer her up with his wisecracks. It was she who introduced Friend to yoga. He wore braces as a child to correct his pigeon toes; after the braces came off, his mother started him on the practice, and he never stopped. His mother gave him books about yogis too, and soon Superman and Batman had little allure. “I wanted to be a yogi because they knew the mysteries of life,” he told me. “They could dematerialize.” He was obsessed with magic (the word is on the vanity plate of his silver BMW, which he inherited from his mother) — and followed raptly the tales of miraculous transformations he heard in the different churches his mother insisted they visit every Sunday. As he grew older, Friend played drums in a rock band, a portal to another kind of transformation to be sure, but one that still spoke to a desire for a very public life.

Friend may not have known it at the time, but he connected with yoga at a critical point in its history in America. As Syman notes in “The Subtle Body,” yoga in the United States dates to the late 19th century, when it was first propagated by Indian yogis like Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda, who wrote “Autobiography of a Yogi.” But the yoga that ultimately prevailed here was not the stringent, meditative practice supposedly leading to spiritual bliss that was more common in India; its health and beauty benefits were always a better sell. (A nice yoga-fan through line runs from Gloria Swanson to Ali MacGraw to Christy Turlington.) By 1976, five million Americans had signed on.

Friend was never content to be just another yoga enthusiast. Horatio Alger could have been one of his swamis. He bought himself a car when he turned 16 with money he made working after school. In 1983, he graduated from Texas A&M University — no bastion of any counterculture — and paid his dues as a financial analyst until he took the leap and began teaching yoga full time. By 1987 he was teaching Houston housewives and, he likes to joke, the occasional farmer in overalls. He also began traveling to workshops all over the country, including one with Judith Hanson Lasater, who introduced him to Iyengar yoga. Within a few years, Friend had taken workshop with B.K.S. Iyengar himself and with Pattabhi Jois, the creator of Ashtanga.

In other words, Friend was aligning himself with the greats of contemporary yoga, Indians whose

## The Yoga Mogul

teachings were then shaping the yoga world. (Lineage is as important in yoga as it is to Boston bluebloods.) By 1989 he was in Pune, for a month of study with Iyengar. That year, at age 30, he gave a confounding performance on a rickety wooden platform at the Siddha Yoga Ashram in Ganeshpuri, India (the same one Elizabeth Gilbert described in “Eat, Pray, Love”). In videos taken that day, Friend looks barely beyond his teens: his brown hair and beard were scraggly, and he was so slight from a bad intestinal virus that he seemed incapable of moving, much less contorting into a lotus position while balancing in handstand. But that is what he did. Friend’s skill was impressive — he was then practicing for a minimum of three hours every day — but what really set him apart was his style, which conveyed both bravado and vulnerability. The hundreds of Indians and Americans present that day gave him a standing ovation, and from then on, the story goes, John Friend was not just the Iyengar teacher for the ashram but a bona fide yoga star, with invitations to teach around the world. “There was a lot of grace involved,” he told me.

As Friend rose to higher positions in the Iyengar organization — he spent four years on the board in the 1990s — he also observed and absorbed Iyengar’s exacting standards of teacher certification, which require the study of anatomy, physiology, philosophy and ethics, as well as teaching a demonstration class and passing a written exam. From the leader of the Ganeshpuri ashram, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda — no stranger herself to American celebrity — Friend learned how to give intimate, inspirational talks to crowds of thousands. He also befriended American scholars of Eastern spirituality studying in India. In each of these encounters, Friend was the yogic equivalent of a sponge, or as one associate recalled, “He was a man with a mission.” The mission then was to reclaim yoga from the many U.S. teachers who were so consumed with the physical practice — it was all about the workout — that they sweated out any trace of spirituality.

Equally important, Friend wanted to create a new yoga school that wasn’t just accessible but commercially sustainable. In the ensuing years, Friend, restless, eager and supremely confident, broke with Iyengar and distanced himself from Chidvilasananda as he began to refine what he saw as his own yoga technique. As he wrote in 1995, “Finally I realized that I was not fully aligned with Mr. Iyengar’s philosophy and method, so it was not dharmic of me to continue to use his name to describe my teaching style.” Their philosophical differences — the kind of intrayogic argument best left to the professionals — were compounded by mentor-disciple issues. In essence, Friend wanted a kinder, gentler yoga school — though his critics say he simply wanted to build his own empire, and grafted a touchy-feely teaching method onto what remains, essentially, Iyengar yoga. (Whether you believe Friend felt constricted or Iyengar felt betrayed, a residue of bad feeling remains.) By 1997 Friend had come up with a name, Anusara, and a mission statement. “Anusara yoga is a hatha-yoga system that unites universal principles of alignment with a philosophy that is epitomized by what I call ‘celebration of the heart,’ ” he wrote.

He merged his entrepreneurial nature with his yogic one. Friend wrote his own teacher-training manual, which is about as detailed as an oil-refinery operations handbook. Like Iyengar, he created a teacher-certification program; his students must complete a minimum of 200 hours of

## The Yoga Mogul

training at workshops — an expense that can require extensive travel — buy his training manual (\$30) and pass his 30-hour take-home test. A \$195 training DVD is also recommended. There are licensing fees of around \$100 that must be renewed annually. In this way, Friend maintains quality control and an income stream, but this standardization has cost him the loyalty of older teachers who find the new rules somewhat unyogic. Friend also discourages Anusara studio owners from including other forms of yoga at their schools, lest they dilute his brand. As one former associate, Douglas Keller, put it, “If a particular McDonald’s store chooses to start serving spaghetti, McDonald’s can decide to revoke its franchise.”

On a brilliant day last April, Friend was in a celebratory mood. He took his small, young staff to an especially nice Woodlands restaurant, where they sat in a private room with fresh flowers, white tablecloths and Champagne. The occasion was Anusara’s 13th birthday and a promising meeting with some investors about the Center, the latest plan to extend Anusaraworld. “Our little company is expanding,” Friend told the group, in between checking texts and e-mail. Friend was, then as always, between tours — he’d been in Detroit and was heading for Japan but already seemed in three places at once.

“What is the company? Anusara!” he declared. “We do yoga lifestyle, helping people to be happy. How do you like that?” The staff looked happy but slightly wary, like kids taken to a nice restaurant by a demanding parent.

Before anyone ordered food, Friend started in on another dharma talk/monologue about the Center, or as he put it, “the home of the kula.” There would be a soundstage and theater for yoga events, along with editing facilities for live streaming video, the better to teach in India as well as Peoria. There would be a 1,000-square-foot retail boutique too. In his prospectus, Friend described the Center as the main artistic training venue for Anusara yoga globally, which would also serve as a place to “make living art, to turn every day into an art project. Shri is the lustrous beauty which turns your mind to the Divine.” Along with Anusara students, there would be filmmakers, musicians, poets, acrobats, dancers and rock climbers.

It sounded like an awful lot, and it was a little hard to tell how Friend was going to make so many activities yogic, life-expanding and restorative all at once. I had a similar feeling when Friend invited me to a private “happening” one night after the Hollywood workshop. The party was held at a loft in a warehouse district near downtown Los Angeles. The music was loud, and the lights were bright and pulsating, and some of the people were in costume. There may have been a smoke machine.

At a certain point, Friend, in black jeans and a spangled black shirt, called for quiet and introduced the entertainment. A young woman danced with flaming torches, and another danced with flaming hula hoops. A pair did a Cirque du Soleil tribute by performing acrobatics while hanging from the 30-foot ceiling on muslin swags. Friend’s contribution was an ode to creativity he

# The Yoga Mogul

recited, while a young woman with flowing curls and a face painted to match her tiger costume danced and writhed on the floor.

We ride the tiger. . . .

I taste her hunger

In the burning of my desire

There is no hotter fire.

The event resembled Ringling Brothers crossed with an Allen Ginsberg reading, what the yogi Judith Hanson Lasater might call “yoga and . . .” — yoga and Pilates, yoga and shopping. Eventually you wind up a long way from sitting in a quiet room, focused on the breath as it flows in and out.

Friend, of course, wouldn’t see it that way. “For me, any artistic expression that is performed and expressed with an intention of awakening to the essential nature of one’s Being (Spirit) and with the intention of glorifying the intrinsic Goodness and Shri (Divine Beauty) of that spirit is considered Yoga,” he wrote me in an e-mail message from South Korea. “Therefore, yoga can be expanded to include dance, music and other forms of Art.”

In other words, it’s all good. Back at the Woodlands restaurant, Friend called for a toast. “To the next level,” he said, raising his glass. “Keep dreaming, keep dreaming. Never stop dreaming.”

*Mimi Swartz is an executive editor at Texas Monthly.*