

By Gabrielle Kennedy / Business Focus

Natural Growth

After a delayed start, yoga has hit Japan. As with the boom that made New York, Sydney and Los Angeles into yoga capitals, a slew of new companies is emerging to service the frenzy.

Patrick Oancia's studio, YogaJaya (meaning, in Sanskrit, "union vanquishes") opened a year ago in Aoyama. The student list has already topped 1,000. Four instructors give 26 classes a week, and three other staff work in administration. Oancia, a Spanish Canadian, is uneasy about the faddish interest associated with Yoga.

"My business is successful because I try to model it in a way that stays true to yoga's essence," he says. He is careful to appoint only instructors who have spent the many hours required to become properly qualified.

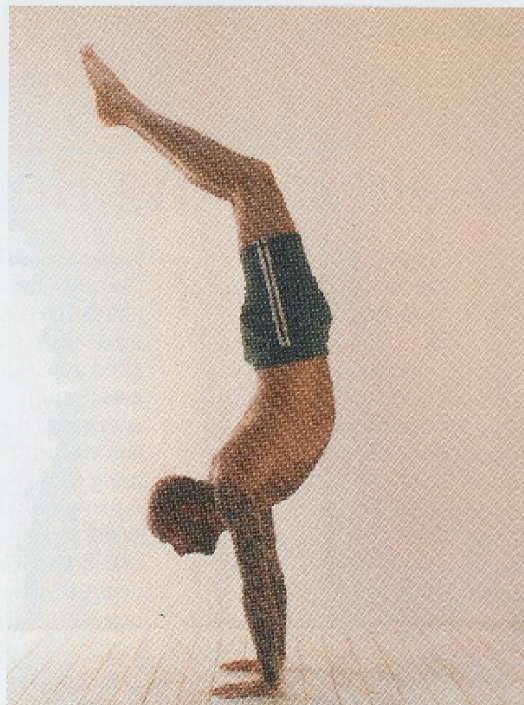
It is important to be picky. Yoga's slow start in Japan was partly due to an unsavory association with the Aum Shinrikyo cult, and changing public opinion is not easy.

"It's a matter of not alienating students or coming on too strong," says Oancia, explaining that his classes have an even balance between westerners and Japanese, with a philosophy of respecting all faiths and creeds.

"At YogaJaya we are trying to build a platform on which anybody can come in and start practicing," he says. "It isn't about vegetarianism, no smoking or no drinking. Yoga is really about letting the individual grow at his or her own pace."

As for marketing, it helps that so many Hollywood stars and international celebrities mention yoga in every one of their interviews. Moreover, the yoga-as-lifestyle pitch works well on stressed-out Tokyoites. Oancia prefers the word-of-mouth approach to attracting new students, and many find YogaJaya this way. "We don't have to go looking for them," he says.

Realism and a sense of integrity are important to Oancia, and he is wary of too much success too soon. Ten-percent growth per month is ideal for the time being, he says.



Patrick Oancia draws on yogic patience as he contemplates future expansion and diversification.

When setting up his business, Oancia could have taken advantage of a government incentive that waives the usual ¥3 million capital requirement for a limited company. Instead, he opted to pay up front.

"I had the money and decided it was worth it," he says, explaining that the fee is merely deferred for five years and that he wanted to avoid the subsequent processing fee.

Oancia has organized a collaboration with Yoga Arts Pty. Ltd. of Byron Bay, Australia. Yoga Arts will send some of its experienced teachers to Japan to oversee and assist in levels 1 and 2 teacher-training courses, which lead to accreditation by the International Yoga Alliance.

For the future, Oancia has ideas for further growth in the industry that are about "better mind and body awareness." Meanwhile, he says, his 10 years of yoga training have given him the patience to wait for the right circumstances.

Tokyo-based Gabrielle Kennedy writes for various publications on culture, society and women's issues.