

PFEIFFER LAW

“Bikram is the new Down Dog”

By Jon Pfeiffer

What is it about yoga instructors? In Los Angeles they have as many groupies as rock stars. Is it the man bun? The faint scent of incense? Or is it the way they are always “helping” their female students align themselves into a perfect pose with an adjustment of the hips or a repositioning of a thigh?

Bikram Choudhury, the founder of Bikram Yoga and self proclaimed “yogi to the stars,” has taken yoga groping to new depths. He put the dog in down dog.

“I’m beyond Superman,” Choudhury said in an interview with the now defunct Business 2.0 magazine. “I have balls like atom bombs, two of them, 100 megatons each. Nobody fucks with me.” However, in the last six months, California courts have been Choudhury’s kryptonite.

The Ninth Circuit delivered the first dose of judicial kryptonite to Mr. Choudhury.

Although yoga is thousands of years old and in the public domain for most of that time, Choudhury tried to copyright his “unique” yoga pose sequence contending that the sequence’s arrangement of postures is “particularly beautiful and graceful.”

In October 2015 the Ninth Circuit ruled that his “sequence of twenty-six poses and two breathing exercises arranged in a particular order” were not entitled to copyright protection. The court ruled that the sequence is an unprotectable idea and that “beauty is not the basis of copyright protection.”

If beauty were copyrightable, Choudhury would undoubtedly try to copyright himself. He describes himself on his website as the “most respected living Yoga Guru in the world.”

A Los Angeles jury delivered the next hit of kryptonite. On January 21, 2016, the jury returned a verdict against Choudhury for 6.4 million dollars. The award resulted from the sexual harassment of Minakshi Jafa-Boden. Ms. Jafa-Boden moved to LA from India in 2011 to work with Choudhury AS HIS LAWYER. According

to the complaint, when Jafa-Boden attempted to investigate a claim by a female student that she had been raped during the Fall 2012 Teacher Training, Jafa-Boden was told to stay out of it and not to investigate. In addition, Jafa-Boden was subject to offensive and intimidating conduct including simulation of oral sex and pointing his finger “in the shape of a gun and demonstrating like he was shooting” Jafa-Boden.

The verdict included punitive damages of over 5.4 million dollars after the jury found that Choudhury had subjected Jafa-Boden to harassment and retaliation. The jury also found that Choudhury acted with malice, oppression and fraud, the prerequisite for an award of punitive damages in California.

More kryptonite is on the way. Jury trials are scheduled to begin in the Los Angeles Superior Court against the yoga guru in June (Jane Doe No. 1), August (Jill Lawler) and December (Sarah Baughn).

The complaints contain similar allegations. Choudhury claimed to have known Lawler and Baughn in past lives. After paying up to \$12,000 to attend a nine-week teacher training course, the plaintiffs were subjected to odd behavior and a variety of sexual harassment. Choudhury allegedly requires certain female students to brush his hair in front of the class and massage his feet for hours in the evening. That’s creepy.

The most serious allegations relate to the sexual harassment. Jane Doe No. 1 claims that Choudhury demanded oral sex then raped her. Choudhury is alleged to have raped her again several days later.

Jill Lawler, a young woman from a small town in Canada, claims that Choudhury tried to put his hand down her pants. Two weeks later, Choudhury demanded that Ms. Lawler manually bring him to orgasm.

Sarah Baughn claims that during a class Choudhury pushed her down then “pressed his body into hers and began whispering sexual things to her.” On another occasion, Choudhury pressed Sarah against a door and sexually assaulted her.

After the complaints were filed, Choudhury’s lawyers released a statement asserting “Their claims are false and dishonor Bikram yoga and the health and spiritual benefits it has brought to the lives of millions of practitioners throughout the world.”

Really?

What does Bikram’s wife have to say about this? In December 2015, Rajashree Choudhury filed for divorce citing “irreconcilable differences.”

Namaste, Mrs. Choudhury.

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