



Yoga, meditation, and martial arts, rapper Afu-Ra says, help make him "a better father, artist—and just a better person."

THE GURUS

Many of the biggest names in rap music are turning away from the anger, violence, and materialism expressed in various aspects of Hip-Hop culture and pursuing a more compassionate path—one centered on yoga, meditation, and Eastern philosophy. BY ADISA BANJOKO

OF HIP-HOP

TEN MINUTES INTO my first Ashtanga Yoga class at the Monkey Yoga Shala in Oakland, California, my triceps are begging me to leave. The cool walnut floors and eggshell-colored walls have turned from a serene place of peace to a masochistic palace of pain. Two days earlier, my ego was pumped up from doing 250 push-ups. Now, however, our yoga instructor, Anabelle, has my ego covering in the corner. It seems the stuffed monkeys hanging from the ceiling are looking at me and saying, "Who looks funny now, tough guy?"

Across the room and wobbling a bit is another fellow. He too looks a bit fatigued, but he remains focused. His face and goatee glisten with sweat from his effort and the warmth in the room. He resembles Malcolm X in Downward Dog.

His name is Tajai (pronounced tah-JAY). At first glance, he doesn't appear different from the other people in the room, and in many ways he's not. But after today's class Tajai is headed straight to the recording studio. Later, he'll pack his bags for a month-long European tour he's doing with his rap group, Souls of Mischief. Although few if any of the other yogis in the class at Monkey Yoga Shala may realize it, Tajai is one of an increasing

number of artists in the hip-hop community who are discovering themselves through the practice of yoga.

When most people think of hip-hop culture, they usually conjure up images of menacing young (and mainly African American) males consumed by their desires, rhyming about a blind lust for monetary gain and an unquenchable sexual thirst. While those elements surely exist in hip-hop recordings (as they do in the ghettos where the art form was born), many hip-hop artists are turning away from the anger and violence associated with hip-hop culture and pursuing a gentler path that embraces yoga and Eastern philosophy.

"The Eye Opener"

(KRS ONE)

TAKE WORLD-FAMOUS RAP pioneer Kris Parker, a.k.a. KRS ONE. Born Lawrence Parker in Park Slope, Brooklyn, he is responsible for much of the way in which contemporary hip-hop music is produced and is unquestionably one of its most profound lyricists. As a homeless youth, Parker spent his days in the library to avoid the harsh cold of the New York streets. His extensive reading there first exposed him to great Western philosophers as well

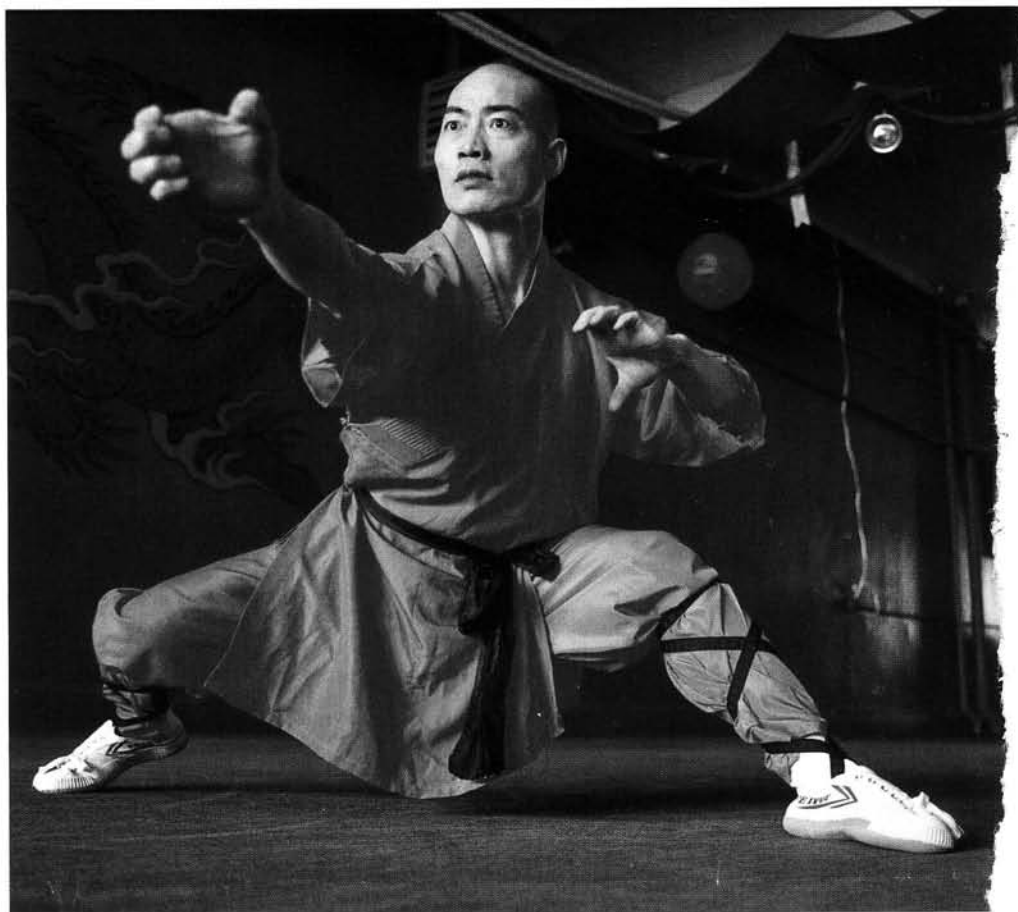
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WALTER SMITH

as ancient Eastern religious texts such as the *Vedas*. In a recent interview with the Australian graffiti-art magazine *Stealth*, Parker stated that for the short time when he did have a home, “My mother was deep into yoga—all forms of yoga: raja yoga, karma yoga, all of the different variations. In our house we always had a global view of religion. We had Buddhist books laying around, Bibles, Torahs, and Korans.”

While he was homeless, he helped Hare Krishnas give out food, and they taught him about Hindu spirituality. Upon his return to the temporary refuge of a homeless shelter, some teasing security guards called him “Krishna,” which became his nickname throughout the shelter system. His encounters with the Hare Krishnas led KRS to become a vegetarian and later the first rapper to champion vegetarianism in the hip-hop community. He also has actively downplayed materialism and encouraged young people to pursue the path of the spirit more than any other rapper before or since. Later he founded the Stop the Violence Movement as well as the Temple of Hip-Hop, a cultural and spiritual organization aimed at helping people express themselves spiritually through hip-hop’s four core elements: rapping, graffiti, DJ’ing, and b-boy’ing, commonly known as breakdancing. (Many people confuse the terms “rap” with “hip-hop.” To people in the hip-hop culture, that’s like confusing the hand with the entire body.)

Not surprisingly, Parker’s interest in fusing culture with spirituality, having developed over a lifetime of studying religious philosophy, shows up in his art. For example, in his song “Step into a World,” from the album *I Got Next*, Parker—whose rap name stands for “Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone”—makes plain his commitment to spiritual practice and in particular to the discipline of meditation: “No bogus hocus pocus, I bring you back to focus/Skills if you notice, my position is Lotus.” And in direct contrast to the title of his first album, *Criminal Minded*, he titled his most recent release *Spiritual Minded*.

Adam “MCA” Yauch, member of the infamous Beastie Boys, experienced a personal and professional turnaround after embracing Eastern wisdom. The Beasties’ original claim to fame was for making songs about alcoholic beverages (“Brass Monkey”) and college dorm themes (“Fight for Your Right to Party”). But when Yauch converted to Buddhism after hearing the Dalai Lama on a speaking tour, he traded in the misogynist lyrics of songs like “She’s Crafty” for those of “Bodhisattva Vow”: “The



Bodhisattva path is one of power and strength / A strength from within to go the length / Seeing others are as important as myself / I strive for a happiness of mental wealth / With the interconnectedness that we share as one / Every action that we take affects everyone.” He also used the influence of the Beasties to spearhead the Tibetan Freedom Tour, which has raised millions to help the Dalai Lama’s mission to spread peace and promote independence for the Tibetan people.

Rapper Afu-Ra (whose name is Egyptian and means “Body of the Life Force”) sought physical security and instead discovered inner security. The streets of his native Brooklyn can be tough, so Afu-Ra chose taekwon do as a means of protecting himself. As he began to excel physically, he found himself being opened up spiritually. Later he turned to yoga to help him advance in his taekwon do practice. “You need the coordination of breath and body to excel,” he says. “Yoga helps me to focus on the internal strength of self.” He continues to do yoga, although he finds it difficult to maintain a consistent practice given the demands of his recording and performing career.

Afu-Ra points out that many young people in the inner city have less access to these teachings than other, more affluent

ABOVE AND RIGHT: Shi Yan Ming, founder and abbot of the USA Shaolin Temple in New York City, who teaches Chan Buddhism to Wu Tang Clan member RZA.

seekers. "If you look outside of hip-hop, like Madonna, Sting, and others with the comfort of money and fame, it's easier for them to be exposed to things like yoga and meditation," he says. "It's really hard to be from the ghetto and get access to and become absorbed in these kinds of activities. It's sometimes hard to do this as an artist and have your music embraced by the people who read books and are engaged in the Eastern arts." Still, Afu-Ra sees those arts as a blessing and life saver on many levels. "The martial arts, the yoga, the meditation, all help me to be a better father, artist—and just a better person."

"Gaining One's Definition"


(Common Sense)

GRAMMY-NOMINATED rapper Mystic is devoted to meditation. She was born at home in Lower Lake, California, on what she describes as a "hippie commune," so "free thought" and Eastern philosophy were a part of her life from the beginning. She began meditating in her preteen years. She meditates every day while

on tour, including just before she takes the stage. Meditation provides the daily solace she needs to avoid being "swallowed up" by the industry. "In this business," she says from her new home in Los Angeles, "you might not have three hours to take a bath and cool out. But you can find 15 minutes to meditate."

On the East Coast, some of hip-hop's greatest rappers seek knowledge of self with help from Shaolin monk Shi Yan Ming. Founder and abbot of the USA Shaolin Temple in New York City, he teaches Chan (also called Zen) Buddhism as well as kung fu and other martial arts to people around the world. His most notable students within the hip-hop world are Wu-Tang Clan's RZA and Ghostface Killer. RZA, the group's producer, is a rapper and had a small role in the critically acclaimed 2000 film *Ghost Dog*. (The story of a hit man—played by Forest Whitaker—who lives by the samurai teachings of the Hagakure, the film provided many urban youth their first encounter with Eastern philosophy.) Asked about the difficulty of teaching ancient Eastern disciplines to latter-day Western students (especially those

**"WHEN PEOPLE LISTEN TO HIP-HOP,
they dance and are happy. This is also meditation. RZA,
when he writes songs, uses philosophy to help people.
HE IS GIVING PEOPLE MEDITATION."**



involved in acquiring fame and fortune), the monk says, "Of course Western culture and Eastern culture are very different. But Shaolin Chan is universal; it's about life. Life has the best of everything. When you study, you learn many things. Hip-hop is a culture in the same way that Shaolin Chan is a culture. People want to meditate. Why? They want to cleanse their minds and insides. You want to feel comfortable. When people listen to hip-hop, they dance and are happy. This also is meditation. People like RZA, when they write songs or rap, use philosophy to help people. He is giving people meditation when they listen to his music." A few years ago, Shi Yan Ming took RZA and some other students to his home temple in China. "I wanted to let RZA and my students know their roots," he recalls, "where they come from [spiritually]." Ming believes that the Eastern philosophy RZA has adopted allows him to connect with audiences anywhere, regardless of any language barriers. "RZA played music and rapped in front of the Shaolin temple. He rapped everywhere. Even without speaking the same language, everybody welcomed him. That's the beauty of Chan."

"Health, Wealth, and Self"

(KRS ONE)

DEF JAM RECORDS FOUNDER and president Russell Simmons may be the most visible yogi in Hip-Hop Nation. In any discussion about hip-hop's inventive businessmen, his name is sure to

be mentioned. But his yoga practice may be a truer reflection of who he is. Simmons sees the acceptance of yoga and other Eastern arts as “the last frontier” for hip-hop. He feels that the slow process of change brought about by yoga leads to authentic growth: “Your heart has to change if there is going to be any real evolution.”

Simmons believes that following yogic doctrines is not as important as pursuing the essence of the path. He also notes that the people in hip-hop who are embracing yoga are doing it at their own pace and that yogis seeking to engage hip-hoppers aggressively might not get the results they seek. “The thing in yoga is we hope that we’re not preaching and trying to convert people,” he says. “We want honesty in this experience, and that’s what makes it so beautiful. We don’t want to impose our will on anyone.” He was first introduced to yoga by a friend who took him to a class taught by Steve Ross in Los Angeles. Simmons immediately felt at home because “there was a lot of hip-hop

being as real as you can be,” Gannon says, “and that’s what yoga deals with as well. And they both are about community: doing it on your own but doing it together.” Life is not wholly surprised at the seemingly unlikely relationship between yoga and hip-hop culture either: “The quest for freedom, independence, and seeking out of a solidarity or comradeship (*satsang*)—all these are yogic goals and are also found in rap lyrics.”

Describing Simmons as “humble,” Gannon recalls his support for an animal rights benefit called “Animal Mukti.” She says Simmons did more than just show up: He brought a CNN camera crew to the Jivamukti headquarters and gave Gannon the microphone—and otherwise drummed up a great deal of press for the event. “He is always looking for a way to turn the spotlight away from himself and onto someone else,” Gannon says.

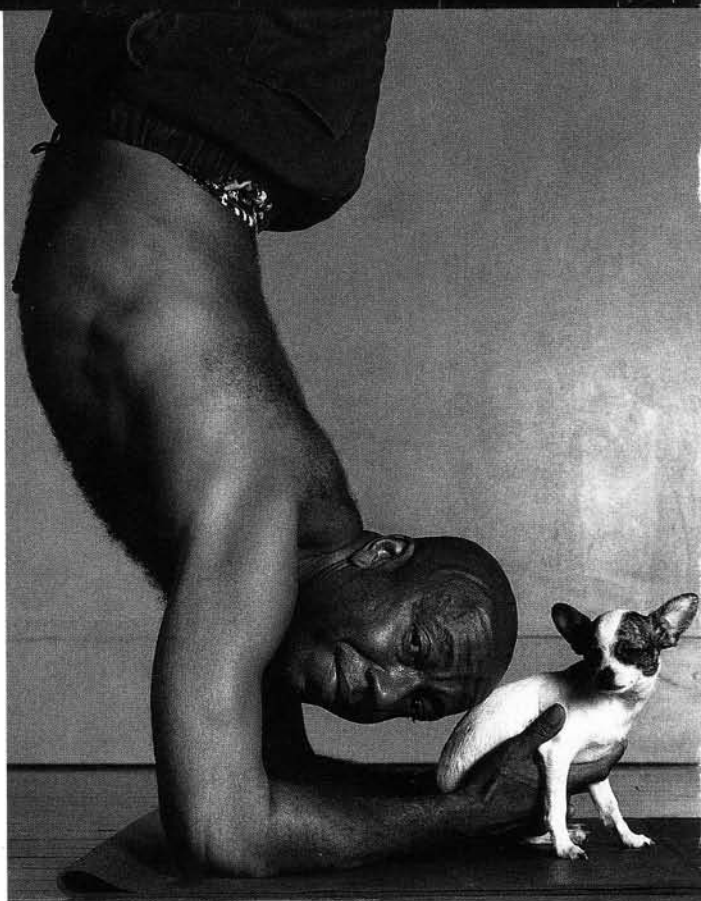
Simmons also agreed to pose yogi style for an Animal Mukti promotional photo. Gannon recalls: “We put Russell in a difficult pose, Pincha Mayurasana [Forearm Balance]. It was hard for

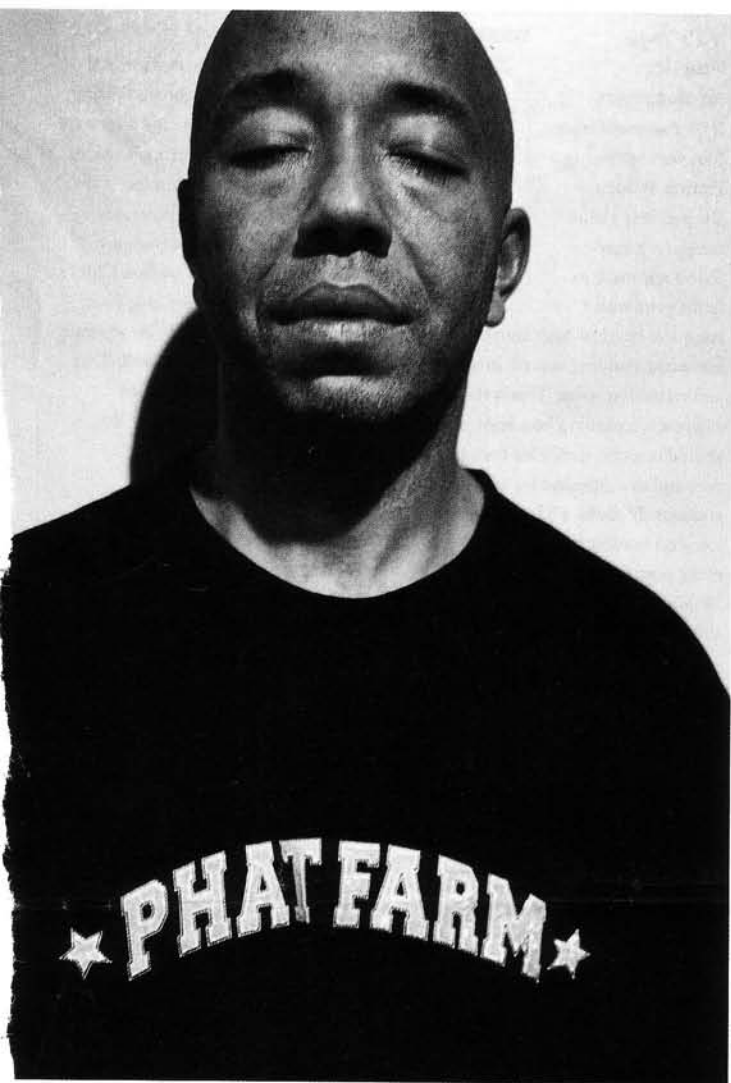
**“THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM, INDEPENDENCE,
and seeking out of a solidarity or comradeship,
[known as *satsang*]
—all these are yogic goals;
THEY’RE ALSO FOUND IN RAP LYRICS.”**

music and a lot of fine girls.” Once he looked deeper, he became a devoted yogi. When asked how he balances the nonaggressive cleansing of the heart he gets from yoga with his reputation for being a shrewd businessman, he says, “My first response when I came out of yoga class was, ‘If I keep doing this shit, I’ll lose all my money.’ What happened, though, was that I rearranged my priorities. When you come out of class, until that first car horn blows, your priorities are rearranged. You’re more in touch with your higher self for a few minutes. You feel an allegiance to something much greater. Then the horn blows and you go back to fighting and screaming. But over time, it starts to set in.”

Simmons believes that the spiritual benefits of yoga have helped him in his business pursuits as well. “As I get a few more seconds a day of presence,” he says, “I’m much more focused, and I do a much better job. Then I make more money. Then the more money I give away or the more time I give to charities to support things that are more important [than money], the more I start running into additional sources of income.” Yoga has enhanced his wealth, health, and sense of self. “Give God your commitment, and you’ll get a lot of that other stuff,” he notes. “That other stuff will become less important but easier to acquire.”

Simmons’s instructors, David Life and Sharon Gannon of the Jivamukti Yoga Center in New York, who attest to his dedication and the authenticity of his practice, point out that yoga and hip-hop share some fundamental values. “Hip-hop is about





ABOVE: Def Jam founder Russell Simmons finds a moment to meditate.

LEFT: Simmons and fellow animal-rights advocate Pepé pose for "Animal Mukti."

him; he was sweating and yet so willing to put himself out for this cause. This little Chihuahua named Pepé was afraid of him because it looked like he was going to come crashing down at any moment. But he did a great job, even managing to smile, and we got a

great photo!" These days, Gannon adds, that pose is not difficult for Simmons at all. "He took that experience and worked on the pose for the next couple of years. Now he is brilliant in it." That's due, at least in part, to his diligence. "Russell comes to class five days a week or more," Gannon notes. "That means that he is in the studio. He's not hiring a private teacher to come to his home. That is really something. Right there, he is transcending the normal celebrity way of practicing yoga."

According to Gannon, Simmons's yoga practice has given him a whole new outlook on his professional life and what his position affords him. "If you want to call him a businessman, okay," she says, "but be real about it. His 'business' is to do significant

things with his life, things that benefit others. He is one of the most genuinely generous people I know. What I mean by 'genuine' is that he loves giving to others. He loves to turn them on, to provide them with a microphone, a hooded sweatshirt, a record deal, a vegetarian cookbook, or his favorite version of the *Yôga Sutra* by Swami Satchidananda." Asked about the future relationship between hip-hop and yoga, Simmons imagines that, "There will be a greater penetration [of yoga and yogic philosophies] here in America. If that becomes true, than its presence in hip-hop would be sure to follow."

"The Next Movement"

(The Roots)

AFTER SAYING NAMASTE to my instructor and classmates at the Monkey Yoga Shala and slowly crawling over to get my shoes, I catch up with Tajai and we head over to a local juice bar. Tajai says that he too was pushed to his breaking point but now feels "energized." He's been attending classes here since April 2000. "Mostly I go, study the poses, then go do the poses on my own at home," he says. "But it's cool to do it in a group setting 'cause you're dealing with your ego." There is something very liberating for Tajai in the challenge of having his coordination and balance put on public display. "Plus, you get the proper instruction," he says. "You really get conscious from the tip of your toes to the top of your head."

Tajai originally started doing yoga after having taken jiu-jitsu classes. He turned to yoga to enhance his flexibility and endurance and soon found yoga to be a true godsend. "I'm a skinny cat," he notes. "So I'm not worried about gaining weight or anything like that. I *am* worried about having a healthy skeletal and muscular system when I'm doing my martial arts." Besides helping him on that score, yoga has helped Tajai see himself as part of a greater global family.

As for the rest of the hip-hop world, Tajai is unsure of the exact course yoga will run. He does not deny that many fads have swirled through the rap culture—like any other subculture—just as yin flows together with yang. Such positive trends as social consciousness, political empowerment, and self-determination have burst onto the hip-hop scene. Unfortunately, there have also always been less wholesome trends such as drug abuse—"Right now, it's mostly drugs like Ecstasy," Tajai notes, "but before that it was weed, cocaine, and heroin." Tajai and other rappers who have learned firsthand the benefits of Eastern disciplines can appreciate the good they could do for the hip-hop community. "Hopefully," he adds, "yoga, meditation, and the rest of these traditions will spread through hip-hop, but in a positive way." ■

Veteran hip-hop journalist Adisa "The Bishop" Banjoko suggested a series of rap song titles for subheads in this article; the name of the artists are indicated in parentheses next to each song title. The Bishop's commentaries, reviews, and articles have appeared in Vibe, The Source, XXL, and other hip-hop magazines, and on such hip-hop Web sites as rapstation.com and daveyd.com. He can be reached at soulpolisher2001@yahoo.com.