

She may have been deemed the original “yoga rebel”, but American model turned yoga instructor and founder of Strala Yoga Tara Stiles is a trailblazer that began the ‘social media yogi’ movement before it became a trend—and as always, she’s doing it her own way.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

Stiles and Substance

With a list of accomplishments that includes advertising campaigns and fashion features for more sports and high-end brands everywhere from books, billboards and glossy magazines than you can count, it would be easy to think that Tara Stiles would come with an attitude. This is a woman who, in addition to the fact that she founded her very own type of yoga, Strala Yoga—now so coveted that it's taught in countries across the globe, both in studios of her own creation and beyond—is also the personal yoga teacher of the one and only Deepak Chopra, has an ever-growing social media following that's so large it's impossible to keep track. And we don't just mean on Instagram—Tara was the star of the first-ever instructional video yoga series, and while she's now savvy across every channel that takes her fancy, her work was featured on TV channels in luxury hotel rooms across the world before YouTube was even a thing. It makes sense then, that with each new opportunity to grow, Tara takes it in her stride, and has a tendency to ace it.

With numerous accolades for her natural knack for clever branding, you'd also think that this is a woman who would put out a carefully portrated public image generated based on what people would want to see or hear—but that couldn't be any more far from the truth. In fact, it's actually Tara's totally real insistence on always being as genuine and true to herself as she can be, that earned her the moniker 'Yoga Rebel' in her earlier days as she transitioned from celebrated model to well-respected yogi, and it's this unique quality that always sets her apart from the rest, and

keeps her ahead of the game—no matter what the rules or circumstances might be. We had the pleasure of catching up with her when she visited Dubai this winter to host a yoga class with Reebok, held atop a sun-drenched terrace next to a luxurious pool at the W Hotel in Al Habtoor City (while she was pregnant and expecting her first child, no less), and more remarkable that the impressive surrounds was the fact that this is a woman who is so down-to-earth it felt like we'd known her for years. Always keeping it real and following her instincts

Remember to go offline and go on for inspiration; and to use it rather than having it use you. //

for what is important in life, this is a woman after our own hearts—and if that isn't the true essence of a yogi, then we don't know what is. It's time to meet the personality behind what is now one of our biggest ever girl crushes...

WH: You were the 'Instagram yogi' before Instagram yogis became a thing. What are your thoughts on people using social media for yoga and sports in general—on the one hand, we've all seen circumstances where someone will do a yoga pose for a moment to look good





for a photo when they don't actually care about doing it in 'real life' for instance... but on the other side of the coin, it could be a great platform to get more people interested in it. What are your thoughts on this and how we should handle it?

TS: I completely agree with you, and it's complicated. In New York you see girls all the time with their friends trying to get a picture of a handstand, and they're basically crashing out hurting themselves trying to get this one picture and one moment. I think there is this pressure, where you can spend a lot of time looking at somebody else's stuff, and you think, 'Oh, I have to have this, or that, in order to present this perfect life in a way,' and it's not real. I think everyone is now craving more realness and authenticity. Of course it's nice to look at beautiful things and that doesn't really go away, but it doesn't have to be so extreme with the feet behind the head and on a beach every day [for instance]. It's not reality. If you're feeling good in your body and your life and you want to share a moment of meditation or what you're

eating and what's real for you, that's better—but that doesn't get rewarded in a way, so a lot of people feel like 'Oh, if I just put on a bikini and Photoshop myself I'll get more Likes!' And it's true [laughs] but I think it's sort of getting rid of this idea that Likes and followers is the here-all and end-all. It's not real, and it doesn't add up to anything in real life necessarily, so I think it's about first just taking time to be in your real life, then sharing what's more natural and being less caught up in that trend, and hopefully change the trend a bit.

WH: Outside of yoga, there's a certain portrayal of women in fitness now, where it's become a bit sultry and unrealistic. What advice would you give the average girl on what to look out for when it comes to #fitspo? It can be quite intimidating... As someone who harnessed the power of online with YouTube before it became popular, we'd love to know what you think about sharing like that, and how to handle the pressure.

TS: I remember I saw that YouTube was a platform and just there. All my yoga friends



at the time when I started putting those videos up thought I was crazy, and they said I was disrespecting yoga in a way, since I was putting up 5-minute videos rather than having an hour, or saying that yoga had to be with a teacher, for instance. And I said, well, my friends back home are stressed, and five minutes of yoga is a great place to start, so I've always come at it with that approach. With different platforms that pop up, I'm not interested in having the most things here and there because I know it's not real—even brands think it's real, sometimes they tell me I should have 5 million, and I'm like, well [people] could

pay for them! [laughs]. But I think for people who are looking to be inspired through social media, it has to be a gut feeling. The internet is great because it's a platform for anyone, but anyone can pretend they're an expert and you never know who you're looking at. We ultimately know that it's about going to the gym with your friends and sharing that... and getting in the habit of changing how you look at that. So instead of looking at these pictures of Photoshopped girls and thinking, 'If I don't have body I suck', and that can be a horrible destructive pattern... and there's so much more of that in the world than when there was

only traditional media. So it's all of the time and anywhere and never shuts off, but it's about people remembering to go offline, and going online for inspiration, and using it instead of having it use you, I think.

WH: It's funny how people used to call you the yoga rebel when the thing that made you so supposedly rebellious has now become the trend! But that's probably why you're so popular—because you're always honest and authentic. What do you think makes Strala Yoga different from the rest? We've noticed your class focused heavily on doing what's right for *your* body rather than fitting into a mould...

TS: [Laughs] Yeah! THAT's always what yoga has been for me growing up, too. Especially in the beginning, I didn't feel like I was coming up with something so radical. We've sort of changed yoga to make it about reflecting our lives of stress and rigidity, and trying to be good at the yoga pose and all those things... it just seems so false to me in a way, and it's also bad in a way because it intimidates people even more. I feel like those aren't misconceptions, they're realities about yoga—being flexible and it being intimidating—you can go to a place for yoga and feel crappy about yourself sometimes, and it's a product of [the fact that] there's just so much happening now. And it's similar with the internet. Just keep going and finding a place that makes you feel good about yourself. With Strala it's always been about finding a way to move in your own body that feels good and within your natural movements. Like, "We're going to go through this pose and keep moving in a way that feels comfortable for you," and when you're comfortable in your body you're able to do more with less effort and not be stressed out the whole time, and achieve more in your life. I mean, that's yoga to me. And it's

Yoga for me is about finding a way to move in your own body that feels good to you /



nice because then anybody can come. You can have somebody that's really athletic, or someone [where] it's their first time, and it's not judgmental. I think that's more important than the taglines of, 'Just be you,' and 'Don't compete with yourself,' and just telling people what to do.

WH: So you're the personal yoga instructor of Deepak Chopra... which is super cool. Can you tell us about that; what have you learned from him?

TS: He's just become honestly like an uncle to me in a way. I met him years ago and he knew about my YouTube videos, which blew my mind. And he said 'I really like how you make it easygoing, we have a lot in common—we both take these ideas about meditation and spirituality and make them easier,' and I'm like, 'Yeah but they're supposed to be that way anyway, someone just needed to say it!' [laughs]. Doing yoga with him is just fun. He's doing so many things all the time, but has the same passion and vision to help people feel better and drop the stress and rigidity in their life, and in so many ways it's given me the confidence and validated exactly what my vision has been forever, with yoga, and he's been such a great cheerleader and friend.

WH: What messages would you want to pass on to your daughter? Especially now in a world where being fit is such a coveted 'trendy' thing—the trend in what the supposed ideal women's body is seems to change every several years, and with so much pressure from society to conform to whatever that current ideal might be, what would you want to tell her in terms of her attitude towards her body image, how to handle that, and her overall approach to health, fitness and wellness as a whole?

TS: Oh gosh! I mean I think it's important for me and Mike to be living what we believe to be kind of treating ourselves well

and feeling good and not living a stressed life, to hopefully be the example for her instead of just telling her! [laughs]. But I think just the main message I'd love for her to live with is to go after the things that make you feel good, and just take care of yourself, and let that be flexible and change. So, get excited about cooking and nourishing your body, and feeling good in your body and moving in whatever way that makes sense; I think that's much more important than

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coming at that from an external point of view like eating these things or moving in this way. It has to come from the inside, otherwise you rebel against that, or you don't want to do that anymore, and it's more of something somebody imposed on you.

WH: You travel so much for work, with such a huge global reach. How do you maintain a healthy lifestyle on the go?

TS: I think it's maintaining the idea of self care wherever you are. For me, I'm sleeping on the plane or bringing my own food a little bit, but not in an obsessive way. I have friends that travel with a blender, and I'm like, 'How do you travel with a blender, that's so cumbersome!' [laughs]. There's little things I love to do, like if I go to a city and I'm there for a little while, I'll make my way to Whole Foods or whatever local grocery store there is. Or if it's a hotel, I'll untuck the mini fridge and put veggies in there and things like that, and snack on things that make me feel good, and keep up an easygoing yoga practice... but also not be so rigid and stressed about it, while not just giving up and say, 'I'm going to have

all the French fries!' [laughs]. I think it's important to just enjoy it and have a balance, and I think science even shows that if you don't always eat perfectly sometimes your body can even handle that better. I also know that stress is such a huge factor—you can eat perfectly but if you're stressed then your body is going to take on everything. Obviously it's important to nourish yourself and eat well, but I think the most important thing is your state of mind, so for me, I

showed up in [Dubai] a day early. Yesterday we slept all day and just hung out by the pool!

WH: Are there any rules that you do follow for nutrition?

TS: Yeah definitely, I'd say not processed is the best way. But just eating really natural foods. We're mostly plant-based and we'll eat meat sometimes if we're out, but most of the foods I cook at home are just simple fruits and veggies and things like that. I feel better when I'm eating as close to nature as possible. It's easy, and it tastes good too!

WH: What advice would you give to someone else trying to take their passion and turn that into something more viable using the power of online?

TS: If you have a point of view or vision about something you don't see out there, that you feel strongly about, then I think there's room for that. If you feel like you're just trying to do something for a different reason or just financially, then it might work, but you probably won't have fun doing it and you won't want to do it all the time, and you'll probably burn out even if it's the best idea in the world. So I know for me it's always come from the same

place of wanting to help people feel good in their bodies with yoga, and not worry so much about the yoga or be so stressed out about it, and everything I do comes from that place. Even now, working with different brands and projects... I wouldn't even call it the buzzword of 'authenticity' but there is a real drive of 'I have this vision and it drives everything that I do.' If you have that in you, and I think most people do about something - if that's what wakes you up in

the morning and keeps you going, then follow it, and don't worry about how it looks on the outside, or spending loads of money right away on branding it. Give it time to evolve. I think a lot of the time [when we try to start a business, us] women feel this pressure to be perfect and have this fancy website with a fancy logo, and a fancy team, but if you just give your idea time to rise and you're still busy working on it and getting out there, then it'll appear to you what it looks like. For me, that's been a lot more fun and easier too, especially as things got busier and more easily. Even when venture companies came in and said, 'Oh, I want to take you this way and put Stralas everywhere and have 1,000 instructors in a week,' and I'm like, 'Ok, that would be nice, but the quality would be terrible and the instructors are the most important thing about Strala - they have to be good or people won't come back!' [laughs]. So we focus on that. And then everything else [after that] is great. It's the same idea as social media - not to worry about what everyone else is doing so much, and if you have that drive and vision, let everything come out of that. ■