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BRING IT OM
Opposite: Jivamukti
Yoga Center founders
David Life and Sharon
Gannon. Above and
below: clients
Gwyneth Paltrow and
Madonna on their
way to the centre

The famously difficult Jivamukti method has demanded unbending devotion to strictures and scriptures from celebrities and lean-bodied New Yorkers since the Eighties. Now, 'really hard' yoga is coming to London. **Stefano Hatfield** meets the founders of the practice where oms and aahs are a serious business



Susan, the teacher for beginners, got straight to the point. 'We are not here just to get a six-pack or to admire the blonde babe in the corner,' she began, reading my mind frighteningly well. 'If you just want a workout, there's a gym downstairs. And please don't leave early during the meditation period at the end of class – it disturbs the others. You may drink water now, but try not to during the class.' She closed the curtains on the hot and stuffy room, then instructed us: 'Take the lotus position, or [staring at me] as close to crossed legs as you can get. Sit tall. Try not to fidget. Let's begin by chanting "Om..."'

Initially, I was a total cynic – as soon as I arrived at the Jivamukti Yoga Center in downtown Manhattan, it felt as if my first class was going to be a mistake. The pre-paid package of 20 classes was originally meant for my long-suffering wife, a career woman with two children. Of course, she hated the place; fountains, altars, chanting and meditation did not sit well with the no-nonsense daughter of an English general. So, it was my inner Scrooge (a 20-class package costs \$280; a single drop-in class, \$17) that led me – a classic media luvvie, lapsed Catholic and occasional gym attendee – to the third-floor, 9,000-square-foot loft space on Lafayette Street.

The reception area, with water cascading down a feature wall, a small shop selling ridiculously skimpy yoga kits alongside copies of the *Bhagavadgita*, and a group of barefoot and sinewy yoginis (female students) were daunting enough; the tiny men's changing room was worse. There were none of the beer guts and BlackBerrys of the typical male locker room, like the one in the gym on the floor below – everyone at Jivamukti made Lance Armstrong look a bit porky.

David Life, one half of the couple who set up Jivamukti, laughs at my story. 'There's a place for everyone who wants to learn,' he says. 'I'm always hearing people tell us, "Oh, you're not as scary as we thought you were going to be." I don't know why people think we're intimidating.' It may be that they've heard that Jivamukti is the yoga centre for beautiful people, where Sting, Christy Turlington, Madonna, Willem Dafoe, Donna Karan and hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons have all practised; where around 500 people a day (most

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of whom look like they've never heard of a doughnut) go to chant, meditate and contort their bodies in ways most of us wouldn't think possible. Life and his partner and co-founder Sharon Gannon, both in their fifties, possess the serene disposition of the more mature, but also have the kind of taut, wiry bodies that most 20-year-olds dream of. When I meet them in the tiny room from which they run the company, Life is sitting nonchalantly in lotus position on an office chair.

This summer, the Jivamukti phenomenon arrives in London, in Ladbroke Grove. It will be the seventh centre Life and Gannon have licensed, their third outside the US (after Toronto and Munich). Yoga in the capital will never be the same again. Critics and fans alike accept that Life and Gannon have had a significant effect on the popularity of yoga in New York and America in the 21 years since they created the Jivamukti method. Driven by an unswerving commitment to yoga's spiritual roots, and buoyed by the positive PR created by their celebrity students, they have helped transform yoga's image from that of a mellow pastime for kooks and eccentrics to a lifestyle practice that appeals to 21st-century urbanites.

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Sometimes criticised for teaching yoga that is 'too hard', they believe unwaveringly that the practice should involve transcending both body and mind. Meshing the spiritual and psychological elements of yoga with the physical ones, classes at Jivamukti force students to confront both their bodily and emotional limitations – I can vouch from personal experience that Jivamukti is as much about dealing with anger and fear as stretching out your hamstrings. Most classes (of anything up to 50 or 60 people) are set to inspirational music and all include meditation, readings from Sanskrit scripture and chanting, time for devotional practice (without concentrating on any particular religion), and a focus on ahimsa, or non-violence, which often manifests itself as a talk promoting animal-rights activism and veganism, or at least the attempt to become a vegetarian.

Despite the shaky start, I ended up using all of my wife's class vouchers, and have continued attending classes for the past two years. Nicole, my regular and very approachable teacher at the downtown centre, said, as part of her first preamble, that 'the most important part of yoga practice is ethical vegetarianism'. As someone who delights in a medium-rare porterhouse at the famed Peter Luger in Brooklyn (the best steakhouse in the world), this would sit as uneasily with me as a giant steak does the morning after I've consumed it. Can a meat-eater not be a yogi? 'You are a work in progress,' says Life, with a none-too-convincing smile. It is a response that says much about Jivamukti, which has been dubbed 'Yoga Inc' by critics. Life and Gannon believe a meat-eater cannot be a true yogi, and will not dilute the teachings, meditation, chants and scriptures just to be more commercially attractive. But neither will they exclude those who are meat-eaters or who just want better abs. 'In the Sixties and Seventies there was this missionary approach, but coercion is anathema to yoga,' says Gannon. 'The teaching can only be given if someone comes to us. If they do, then we have a duty to teach them about principles such as vegetarianism.'

Life and Gannon did not originally set out to build a yoga empire with ardent devotees; although they are coy about it now, they once wanted to be rock stars. Back in the early Eighties, the pair looked like David Bowie and Debbie Harry – all ripped fishnets, backcombed hair and big make-up. Life was born David Kirkpatrick in Pigeon, Michigan, and left home to travel the country looking for a place he wanted to live in; he settled in New York because of its energetic underground scene. A musician, artist and antiques dealer, he set up the quintessentially cool East Village hangout the Life Café in 1980. Gannon was brought up in Washington DC, and studied dance at college. She played the Life Café in 1982 as lead singer and violinist with the jazz/rock band Audio Letter, where she met David. A waitress at the café saw that Gannon was struggling with back pain from an onstage fall, and suggested yoga as a gentle therapy.

Life and Gannon fell in love with each other – and with yoga. In 1986, they studied yoga for four months in India, gaining a teaching certificate and meeting the renowned 'anarchist Swami', Swami Nirmalananda. Returning to New York, they found their friends were more interested in their yoga than their music, and began teaching. By 1989, they had opened the first Jivamukti Center in the East Village – Diane Keaton was their first celebrity client.

In interview, Sharon Gannon is the more earnest of the couple; when Life makes the occasional quip, she shoots him a quick look. She comes across as half Morticia Addams, half earth mother, and clearly has fearsome discipline and commitment. But Gannon is actually quite funny, and shrieks with laughter during her classes; and Life's class begins with a jokey attempt to perform an impossible jump.

Gannon and Life offer slightly differing versions of how they started out. 'Over 20 years ago, it was very difficult to find people practising yoga who acknowledged Patanjali's Yoga Sutras [a series of aphorisms that form the key text of the yoga philosophy],' Gannon says. 'We thought it important to acknowledge our teachers; not to do so would be arrogant and egotistical. We were not originally interested in opening a yoga school; we were interested in yoga and enlightenment.'

'The venues we ended up teaching in were really unattractive,' says Life. 'Their atmospheres weren't conducive to spiritually enhancing teaching. We'd be warming up in basements that smelt of stale beer and cigarettes. We thought that teaching yoga should be clean. When we got our own place, nobody minded paying to come; but we talked about exactly the same stuff, and still used music and poetry.'

I ask them about the Jivamukti Center's slightly unnerving altars – London will have them too. Why do these two lapsed Catholics, who insist that yoga is not a religion but a philosophy, insist on altars filled with flowers, incense and photos of their teachers and heroes, from the Beatles to Mahatma Gandhi? 'Enlightenment should be approached in a similar way to becoming a great pianist or musician,' says Gannon. 'And every great musician acknowledges a teacher; even Mozart, Beethoven, Bob Dylan and the Beatles had teachers. But, in our culture, the very thought that you were given this idea by somebody else is thought to be an expression of weakness or lack of originality. There's a stigma attached to teachers.'

The pair decided to create their own form of yoga – which is sometimes criticised for being too hard, and for its rigorously spiritual focus. 'We went to every place in New York,' says Gannon. 'Each one nurtured us, but there was something missing. There were the overtly spiritual centres, where asana classes, kirtan (chanting) and discussion were all kept separate. We wanted it all together. We thought that what was wrong with our society was fragmentation. Yoga means focusing attention on one thing and holding it.'

'The idea that yoga should be slow and relaxed evolved because the first teachers in the US were sponsored by little old ladies in church groups, and that's what they needed it to be,' says Life. 'We

learned hard and fast in India, not here. At times, in our teacher's studio, there would be three inches of sweat on the floor and we had to use carpets for mats because everything else was like an ice rink.'

The fact that yoga is now seen as an extremely trendy pastime can have its downsides. Celebrity endorsements aside, yoga has become so fashionable that two years ago, Gucci produced a yoga mat that retailed at \$875. Gannon reveals a little frustration. 'We have been called yoga fundamentalists in a negative way because of our emphasis on meditation and the Sanskrit,' she says. 'And yet, so many times, we have been questioned about "rock star" yoga. At the root of the negativity is the feeling that stars are superficial – the press think that they are in this just for show. Each time, I have to answer that the stars I know personally are among the most hardworking and disciplined individuals, and also the most generous people.'

'Many of the earlier yoga teachers were a bit frumpy and cranky and sort of didn't have anything else going on,' says Life. 'When we started, we had everything going on: successful art shows, musical careers, a café. We looked good. I think people were inspired when they saw that we were doing this. That's why we think it's great that celebrities are into it; they come for the same reasons as everyone else, but they influence a lot of people. When people started to see smart, modern, successful people doing yoga, the image began to shift. I don't know if I can put a date on it, but look at Sting, Mick...'

Some might argue that, with 400 to 500 people a day paying \$17 a class, a book, video and clothes all for sale, and new centres opening in Munich, Toronto and London, the pair are abandoning their ideals in favour of commercialism. But Gannon says that it was one of their students, Manizeh Rimer, who approached them about opening a centre in London. 'We have no interest in opening centres. Our interest is in maintaining the integrity of what we believe. That's why all teachers will be Jivamukti-trained. We can never sell out. We get criticised because people think Jivamukti means celebrities, or a beautiful place, so it must cost thousands of dollars. But if we really wanted to make a lot of money, would we talk about our vegetarianism? Would we insist on readings in Sanskrit and chanting from holy scriptures? These are not really marketable things.'

'The products are just a way of keeping our heads above water,' says Life. 'We didn't start to set up a business; we started because people wanted us to teach them. The flipside of the burgeoning interest in yoga is that I fondly remember the days of being the only place in town. Now, we have to scramble a little just to stay alive – a few centres in New York and the US have had to close because there is so much competition.'

Yoga allows Life and Gannon a nice lifestyle by most people's yardstick: there is the Manhattan apartment and the house in Woodstock, upstate New York. But where others build heated swimming pools, the couple have built an ashram in the garden, in which they can teach up to 20 students. 'David and I have dedicated our lives to trying to make the teaching accessible; to try to help you understand why standing on your head will contribute to you feeling better,' says Gannon.

The couple's personal practice begins at about 7am, and they often work 18-hour days. Their life is the Jivamukti centres and travelling on the yoga conference circuit. When I ask them why they bother to attend conferences, the answer is simple: if they didn't go, nobody would be talking about bhakti (devotion) and ahimsa (non-violence). It's this dedication to promoting an integrated practice that makes Jivamukti the absolute antithesis of 'McYoga'. Without Life and Gannon and their rigorously 'pure' teaching, the West's yoga scene would have been left wide open to 'disco' yoga and yugalates (a yoga/Pilates crossover practice), \$875 yoga mats, and classes run at a pace suitable for little old ladies. □



LET'S TWIST AGAIN
Clockwise from left: Madonna practising Jivamukti yoga. Christy Turlington in the Tree pose. Jivamukti Yoga Center Downtown, in New York. Life and Gannon in the Crow pose

JIVAMUKTI COMES TO LONDON

Manizeh Rimer, 30, is the former student of David Life and Sharon Gannon responsible for setting up Jivamukti Yoga London. Born in Karachi, Rimer previously worked for an internet start-up company in California, and attended Jivamukti yoga classes every time she was in New York, on business or visiting family. Since moving to London three years ago, Rimer has spent almost a year's worth of time at Jivamukti in New York, learning more about both the method and the business.

The 3,000-square-foot Jivamukti Yoga London is due to open in May or June in Ladbroke Grove, but the official launch is in July, featuring a set by the 'king of kirtan', musician Krishna Das. Just like the New York centres, it will be filled with altars, incense and flowers, but will break with precedent by featuring a juice bar. 'We'll have a lot more intermediate classes than New York, and more "basic" classes,' says Rimer. 'But the principles and some teachers will be the same.'

Teaching styles will be sympathetic to the fact that the standard of physical practice in London is not as advanced as in New York. 'I like to give the easier version of a pose and ask people if they want to do the harder version, rather than the other way around,' says Rimer. 'There will be a lot of seeing how it goes. But I think people here like a challenge.'

'In London there's not a lot of chanting in classes – that doesn't mean we won't chant, but that we will work our way into it,' Rimer continues. 'We will, of course, be teaching ahimsa [non-violence], but I don't believe in making people feel bad about anything they do. You should leave a class feeling good.' A 90-minute class (held three or four times a day) will cost £12 each, with discounts for packages. Sharon Gannon and David Life will teach at the centre at 300 Kensal Road, London W10, from 7–10 July. For more information, visit www.jivamuktityoga.co.uk.

