Yoga's New Posture
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TRENDS

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Jivamukti Yoga Center's Indian spirituality gives you more than just exercise

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There are the yogis of Vrindaban and Kashi--and those of Manhattan. The past few years has spawned a new tribe of US yoga teachers, driven by stressed out, health-conscious yuppies searching for solutions on a meditation mat. Barbara Streisand, Robin Williams, Sting and Madonna are some of the celebrities who swear by yoga. Madonna was recently on the Rosie O' Donnell show demonstrating Surya Namaskar, explaining how yoga helped her get into shape after her baby's birth. In fact, yoga is the hot health craze right now. Everyone knows it has infiltrated sports and fitness clubs, but you may not be aware of a new generation of yoga centers that are proliferating in the US.

A popular pilgrimage spot for many is New York's Jivamukti Yoga Center, which offers the tantalizing promise of not only a well-toned body, but salvation, too. Celebrities Madonna, Uma Thurman, William Dafoe, Sting and Diane Keaton are regulars. From half a mile away you can spot the huge Om sign outside

this 9,000-square-foot yoga palace in Manhattan. Visiting the center is like entering another dimension. A waterfall cascades over one wall, and the place is awash in purple, fuchsia and turquoise. Three-foot-high Oms grace the foyer, and shoes aren't allowed beyond a certain point. With many images of Lakshmi, Ganesh and Siva, the place has the calm and peace, even the pulsating energy, of a temple.

Deva Das (David Life) and Tripura Sundari (Sharon Gannon), two quintessential New York artistes who discovered yoga by accident, founded Jivamukti ten years ago. Reared Catholic, the two were intrigued by Eastern spirituality. Sundari, exposed to Vedanta at the Theosophical Society in Seattle, incorporated sacred texts into her dance performances while Deva Das, an artist and poet, blended mysticism into his work. They performed together and attended yoga classes in New York. Gradually they created "Yoga Asana" dances with pre-recorded narratives and encouraged audience participation in clubs. Sundari ended up teaching the audience about alternate nose breathing while Deva Das had them trying to levitate. He chuckles, "Oh, yes, in New York we have very cooperative audiences."

While catering to pop culture, Deva Das and Sundari themselves embarked on a serious yoga quest, traveling to India for teacher training. They met gurus like Pattabhi Jois in Mysore, who taught them ashtanga yoga. In 1991 Deva Das was initiated as Swami Bodhananda and given orange robes by Swami Nirmalananda Sarasvati in Karnataka. Vows of poverty, celibacy and simplicity were harder to keep in New York. "People were treating me differently, looking up to me at the center," Deva Das told Yoga Journal for a 1995 article. "Sharon

and I never got into this to be anyone's guru, just teachers. We want our students to be independent of us. It eventually became clear to me that being a swami here was not and could not mean the same thing as being a swami in India." Two years later Deva Das renounced his vows. In doing so, he broke the revered Hindu tradition that sannyas is a lifetime commitment. He is the only person Nirmalananda ever initiated as a swami.

The Jivamukti Yoga Center, launched in 1989, differs from other schools in its unabashed spirituality and proud God-centeredness. Deva Das observes, "To us the physical practices of yoga are tools, not the goals. The goal is God Realization." Every hatha yoga class begins with chanting Sanskrit slokas, and classes in Sanskrit grammar are offered, plus daily free kirtans and talks by visiting scholars and gurus. The yearly membership is a Himalayan $1,200, but single classes run $15. Skeptics warned Sundari and Deva Das that a center with chanting and religious teaching would never succeed. But Deva Das points out, "Recently we had 400 people every day for a month--that's 12,400 people. Out of that, only two left, complaining they're not into chanting."

America's unique in its widespread hunger for godliness. Says Sundari, "Everyone craves a spiritual connection. You can get exercise anywhere, but at Jivamukti students chant. At first it's alarming for them, but becomes so beautiful and freeing." To make it all more palatable to US audiences, Sundari and Deva Das translate the Guru Mantra, which begins every class, into English.

Both are strict vegetarians and promote vegetarianism and animal rights at the center. A strong emphasis is also placed on education and teacher training programs. Explains Sundari, "We're not just making a living. We have a responsibility and an obligation. It would be easier not to say anything--just inhale and exhale, do this and do that--but our consciousness, and our gurus, will never let us do that."

While Sundari and Deva Das are serious about spirituality, they know that in a world of short attention spans and pop culture, marketing is everything. Jivamukti Center has a trendy boutique where you can purchase Om watches, Bliss T-shirts, serpent bracelets, yoga videos and tapes. The Center sports a permanent stage, meditation temple, "asana dance" classes, music concerts and massages. Says Deva Das, "God made all this. It doesn't matter if you're uniting with a computer or a waterfall. We can use any skillful means given to us. We want to remystify a practice made mundane."

On a huge purple and gold altar in the main yoga room lie images of the multi-armed Hindu Gods and Goddesses and yoga gurus--but also of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King--and Glinda the good witch from the "Wizard of Oz." "Who is Glinda the good witch?" Sundari asks."She is really Lakshmi. But in our American culture where the movie stars are the gods and goddesses, who is Lakshmi? In America She is Glinda, the good witch. We're trying to get people to look at their own daily lives and find the spirituality there."

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CELEBRITIES

The Joy of Anonymity

Rock music star Sting, an ardent yoga devotee, and his wife Trudi Styler recently went to India with Deva Das and Tripura Sundari for two weeks. Sting, who only encountered five-star hotel culture on his last trip to India, visited temples for the first time. The foursome stayed in dharamsalas in Gokul with no running water or electricity. They ate food sitting on the floor and did service every day. They also visited Rajasthan, where they celebrated Holi and, covered with colors, visited many temples. Sting, usually mobbed wherever he goes, had a welcome brush with anonymity this time in small holy towns like Gokul, Mathura and Vrindaban, places far removed from American pop culture. At some places people had heard a celebrity was coming. They approached Deva Das and said, "Oh, I'm so happy to meet you, Sting--I've heard so much about you." In the temple, devotees rushed past the star, eager only for God's darshan. Says Gannon, "He loved that--that was the beginning of real yoga for him."