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Magazine

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SUSAN SARANDON'S DAUGHTER

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Yoga can be the most relaxing thing in the world—unless you're cursed by the nasty *namaste* of one of NYC's aggressive yogis.  
By Beth Landman

# Is your yoga teacher KILLING YOUR ZEN?

**K**athy Choi was excited when she walked into the Yogaworks studio on the Upper West Side. "The teacher had a good body and looked intense, and I thought 'This is going to be great,'" says the 29-year-old, a manager at AOL. But once the class started, "the instructor began barking orders, telling people they were doing things wrong," she says. "She pushed me into positions, not in a way that was guiding, but as if she was frustrated that I wasn't getting it. When it came time for headstands, she was chuckling and sighing at the people who wanted to use the wall instead of doing

them without support. She made me feel like crap."

Over at Equinox Gym in the Flatiron District, 25-year-old Becca Brown, a restaurant publicist, also found her Zen zapped by an instructor. "I was in my yoga zone," she says, "and the teacher glanced at me and announced, 'This girl looks bored.' I'm not sure if he was trying to challenge me or be funny, but I was embarrassed."

The idea of the beatific yogi, guiding you through your postures with the nurturing grace of Shiva, is not always a reality in New York. Peppered among the city's calm, centered teachers are some who tread a more aggressive path to nirvana. With studios offering train-

ing courses as short as four weeks, and successful instructors earning six figures, more people than ever are choosing to teach yoga. And not all of them exemplify patience and serenity.

This is particularly true of instructors who have transitioned to the field from stereotypically aggressive professions. "A lot of people who were in finance, advertising and marketing are jumping on the bandwagon," says Jean Koerner, 41, an instructor at Yogaworks's Midtown and Flatiron locations. "Some are looking for a life change, others are seeking a lucrative career." Equinox receives about 100 résumés a month from instructors hoping to teach in their New York clubs. The company holds auditions three or four times a year, and they can seem more like scenes out of *A Chorus Line* than moments from *Gandhi*. "People want to seem sure of themselves at the tryouts, but some of them come off full of themselves instead," says Mark Hendricks, 35, an Equinox coordinator.

For those who make the cut, ego can still become an issue. "Some teachers like to make pronouncements," says John Priest, 41, a comedian whose mother is a yoga instructor. "The other day I took a class and the teacher was giving a speech about not eating meat. A girl raised her hand and asked, 'What if I feel better when I eat meat?' The teacher snapped, 'Yoga is not about feeling better.' Well, what is it about, then? Taking pictures with Madonna

to promote your business?"

Forcefulness sometimes goes beyond the emotional. "There was a woman in class who didn't want to do a headstand in the middle of the floor. She felt safer doing it up against a wall," says Ruth Chase, who practices several times a week at Jivamukti Yoga in the East Village. "Yet the instructor kept insisting that she try it. He was saying, 'Come on, you have to take risks,' and she kept repeating that she didn't feel safe. It was really uncomfortable."

**"There is a competitive nature among some teachers. They're tied to the idea that everything has to be extreme."**

Dr. Sean McCance, an orthopedic surgeon at Mount Sinai and Lenox Hill Hospitals, has seen the results of such bullying. "There are people with sprains and strains induced by yoga teachers who pushed them too far," he says. "I saw one woman who required surgery because the instructor had come up behind her and forced her beyond her limit. There is a competitive nature among some teachers. They are tied to the idea that New York is a cutting-edge city where everything has to be extreme."

Meanwhile, some yoga teachers blame their angst on their students. "Kimora Simmons has come into class with her cell phone ringing," gripes a 45-year-old financial services manager who practices regularly at Jivamukti Yoga. And Cyndi Lee, founder of Om Yoga in Union Square, says she has had to stop students from answering calls and text-messaging during class.

But in the end, "there is not a lot in yoga about helping others," says Cyndi. "It's not like Buddhism. It's 'Look what I can do,' and it can breed a lot of spiritual arrogance."

## Islands of Calm

Yoga may have some pushy teachers, but there are still plenty who can help you chill out. These are some of the most centered instructors in the city.

• **Georgia Balligian, at Bikram Yoga**  
797 Eighth Ave., between W. 48th and 49th Sts.; 212-245-2525; 173 E. 83rd St., at Third Ave.; 212-288-9642

Since Bikram—aka "hot yoga"—follows a prescribed sequence of poses, the instructor really makes or breaks the class. Georgia, who teaches at Bikram's Midtown and East Side branches, is committed, compassionate and entertaining.

• **Adam David, at Crunch**  
54 E. 13th St., between Broadway and University Place; 212-475-2018  
Pounding techno music may be emanating from the spin studio down the hall, but Adam keeps you so focused you'll barely notice. Lucky students are sometimes treated to mini neck massages with aromatic oil during final relaxation.

• **Stephanie Cullen, at Equinox**  
897 Broadway, at E. 19th St.; 212-780-9300  
The head of Equinox's yoga program, Stephanie favors a spiritual approach, and she begins each session at the club's Flatiron location with a poem or a passage. The physical moves flow organically in her classes, combining Ashtanga, Vinyasa, power and restorative yoga.

• **Jules Febre, at Jivamukti**  
841 Broadway, between E. 13th and 14th Sts.; 212-353-0214  
Jules emphasizes breathing in his classes at this Union Square yoga temple, using extended inhalations and exhalations to promote relaxation. He has a gentle touch, and is mindful not to push students beyond their limits.

• **Stacey Brass, at Laughing Lotus**  
59 W. 19th St., between Fifth and Sixth Aves.; 212-414-2903  
Despite her large following, Stacey still remembers her students' names and abilities. She's caring but not intrusive, and her breadth of knowledge helps both novices and veterans improve their practice under her guidance.

Whether that's a grin or grimace depends on the instructor.

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