

The Peaceful Radicals

On October 27, Sharon Gannon felt like a front-runner on Election Day. Her first solo album was climbing Amazon's lists of best-selling music. It reached No. 1 on the New Age chart—no surprise. But here was something unexpected: *Sharanam*, with its clubby takes on ancient mantras, had also broken into the top five on the pop chart, where it was keeping Taylor Swift's latest album company.

Best known as the co-founder of Jivamukti Yoga, Gannon has been making music for longer than Swift has been alive. It was through music that she met David Life, her partner in life and in Jivamukti, in 1983. Gannon's Seattle-based art-rock band played his coffeehouse in New York's East Village. She still remembers how generous he was that night, helping the band set up, bringing them drinks, and giving them all the money he collected at the door. That summer, Gannon and the band's guitarist relocated to New York at the urging of musician friends. She began working at the coffeehouse, a boho magnet that inspired a scene in the Pulitzer Prize-winning musical *Rent*, and Life joined her band, creating one-of-a-kind instruments, such as a lyre made out of a human skull. Both had encountered yoga as early as the 1960s, and they incorporated "lessons" into their performances. "We would get people to chant in Sanskrit, for instance, as well as lead simple pranayama practices," says Gannon. "During some performances, we would pull people into meditation before they knew what hit them." >>



Life and Gannon at their home in Woodstock, NY.



In the late '80s they opened a basement-level yoga studio in the East Village. Life made a sign: "The Jivamukti Yoga Society." They derived the name from the Sanskrit term *jivanmuktib*, meaning "liberation while living." Though known for its intense physicality, their brand of yoga is unequivocally spiritual. "We teach yoga as a means to enlightenment, because we believe that that is the only worthwhile activity to be involved in," Gannon says. "To me," Life adds, "the physical health side is mundane when compared to cosmic consciousness."

Life and Gannon emphasize *ahimsa*, or non-violence, perhaps more than any other yogic precept. Their 2002 book, *Jivamukti Yoga: Practices for Liberating Body and Soul*, includes photos of caged hens, rabbits in a cosmetic-testing laboratory, and a collapsed dairy cow, in addition to those illustrating asana sequences. Veganism is an essential part of the Jivamukti method. "We live in a culture based on enslaving animals and exploiting the earth," Gannon says. "In order to attain enlightenment, which is the realization of the oneness of being, a

person must first recognize every other being as their own self."

In 2003, the couple purchased 76 acres of forestland in upstate New York to save it from development. The Wild Woodstock Forest Sanctuary, as they call the property, has since grown to 120 acres. When they're not teaching around the world (their 2011 schedule includes

a retreat in Kenya as well as visits to the eight Jivamukti centers in North America and Europe), they live on the sanctuary, where they have a house, a yoga studio, and a vegetable garden. They feed the many wild animals organic grains, seeds, and nuts. They teach there every day in August, opening their home to dozens of students. At least once a year, they go into retreat—meditating, fasting, and practicing *mauna*, or silence. "We emerge with more clarity and energy to meet the demands of our intense schedule," Gannon says.

At 59 and 60, respectively, Gannon and Life show no signs of slowing down. And what's more, they remain impossibly hip. When their current New York yoga center celebrated its grand opening in 2006, rock star Sting and wife Trudie Styler, hip-hop impresario Russell Simmons and then-wife Kimora Lee, and actresses Uma Thurman and Elizabeth Berkley were in attendance. Asked to enumerate the hallmarks of Jivamukti Yoga, Life put "hipness" first: "hipness, artistic, potent, heretical, radical—as well as traditional." —Anna Dubrovsky >>

BLESS YOU: A Jivamukti Practice

UNLESS YOU'RE IN THE CLERGY, you're probably not in the habit of dispensing blessings—except when people sneeze. But blessing others can have a profound effect on your life, Gannon says. "There is great power in giving blessings, not just for the recipient of the blessings but also for the one giving the blessings," she says. "Over time it can transform you and the people in your life into holy beings." Don't worry, she's not suggesting that you make like the Pope. Instead, she suggests incorporating blessings into your yoga practice. Giving blessings anonymously is not only more practical than giving them aloud but also eliminates the risk of inflating your ego.

To begin the "blessing meditation," take a comfortable seat, close your eyes, and become aware of your breathing. Call to mind the people you love. With each inhalation, silently say: "Blessings to..." As you exhale, silently say the name of a loved one. Continue for several minutes, extending blessings to family and friends. Then move on to others, such as neighbors, co-workers, and past boyfriends or girlfriends. Be sure to include people you have or have had a difficult relationship with. "You will find that as you say their names, their images will appear to you," Gannon says. "With consistent practice, you will be able to not only see them but also to feel their presence. Over time, difficult issues that you may have with them will begin to resolve themselves. You will find that if you encounter them, your relationship will have magically and dramatically changed." —A.D.