

Do I Scare You?



interview with

By Phil Chapman and Scooby Gill

Liz Connolly

"Do I scare you?" asks Liz. "Err, just a little bit" Phil replies as we sit outside in the glorious June sunshine. We are interviewing Yoga teacher extraordinaire, Liz Connolly, along with her partner Gauté Gulbrandsroed, at Yoga Farm near Penzance, Cornwall.

We have just been put through our paces in a three-hour Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga workshop aimed mainly at teachers and attended mostly by Liz's previous students of all levels and abilities. The walls had dripped with perspiration, we had all laughed and some of us had pleaded for mercy as Liz took everyone to a new level of practice. Now we had the chance to find out more about Liz, without speaking to her upside down or whilst she stood on our thighs and put us into positions we had previously thought impossible. Her 'school mistress' air was now softened slightly by her sparkling eyes and her floppy orange sun hat, as she sat waiting for our first question.

Liz - I was off school and was watching a television programme with Richard Hittleman. I hated school and preferred watching Yoga on television. I watched it every afternoon.

Q Was it long before you found a teacher?

Liz - No, it wasn't long. I was about 13. I studied with many teachers and 7 years later I started teacher training. My main teacher then was Silva Mehta, a great teacher who was involved with the *Inner London Education Authority* in training Yoga teachers for the Adult

Education system. Then, in 1980, Silva sent me off to India to study with Mr Iyengar because I had a lot of neck problems. He helped me so much. After three months he told me to come back to the UK and start teaching. Then I went to every workshop he did in England. After working with Iyengar, my practice was much stronger but I still had problems with my neck and used to avoid doing shoulder stands. Later I started working with Shandor Remete and he said, 'I suggest you try Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga'. That was about 9 or 10 years ago. I didn't know

anything about it at the time. Then David Swenson came into my class one day and invited me to join his class in Prussia Cove. I went to two sessions a day and got so much stronger. I was hooked from then on. I have also studied with Graham Northfield and John Scott.

Q Do you think that Yoga is primarily for people with natural flexibility?

Liz - No, not at all. Just look at what's happened with me. I had a riding accident when I was very young which broke part of my lumbar spine. My feet have been operated on so that upsets the foundations and I have Spondylolisthesis, a serious problem in my back. Osteopaths have told me never to do backbends, inversions or to go up on to my head. I used to get a lot of pain, pins and needles, and nerve damage but since I have been doing Ashtanga Vinyasa, I have built up the

dried out and can no longer give as a teacher.

Q How long do you think people should practise before they consider teacher training?

Liz - It depends on the individual. I'd say on average 4 years before they can actually go out and be good teachers. Certain people like John Scott started teaching after 6 months and he's a great teacher. It all depends on the intensity of their practice. Some people can train for 20 years and still be hopeless.

Gauté - I think it's a question of the individual's presence. Being present in what they are doing. If you are not 100% focused and present in where you are, you are just doing the same thing over again. You don't evolve. If you have total focus and are present in what you are doing, you are actually evolving from every class you take and from your own Yoga practice.

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strength so much. Gauté also had a severe accident in which he broke his back sky-diving and was in the utmost pain imaginable.

Gauté - Yes, I was very stiff even before my accident.

Liz - He came along and worked intensively and because of that he has progressed so far. If Gauté can do Yoga with a steel rod in his back and I can do it with the problems I've had, then anybody can if they are willing to put the work in.

Q In the Yoga media there have been reports of people being injured practising Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga or when receiving adjustments. How do you think this happens?

Liz - I think it's down to lack of preparation by the student. Also I think that since many Ashtanga Vinyasa teachers are very flexible, they often have no understanding of people's difficulties. Some people are even doing teacher training when they haven't been properly trained themselves. That's why I've set up the teacher-training course. Teachers need to understand how the body works and how to adjust people. I've been very lucky to have worked with Silva Metha in her medical classes in London.

Q What do you think makes person able to be a good Yoga teacher?

Liz - The ability to practise, to try, to be open, to want to teach. They have to want to. There are a lot of people teaching now because it's fashionable, but they'll burn out. I've seen a lot of teachers working morning, afternoon and night. They don't feed themselves, they don't nourish themselves. The result is that they are

Liz - Teachers have to have a passion for Yoga. It has to be their love. I love teaching. I love teacher training. The teacher training courses are very tough but people end up being good teachers at the end of it.

Q Do you think for somebody to do that it would have to be the main focus of his or her life?

Liz - Yes. Sometimes relationships and family life can suffer. It is very hard to be a Yoga teacher and deal with a family life as well. When I went to India, I left my husband with the kids!

Gauté - Liz has said that to be a teacher you have to continue taking workshops and classes and be able to continue being a student.

Liz - Always. You have to learn all the time. Teachers do need to continually work, continually go to other teachers to get a fresh input of knowledge. Nobody should feel they are too great to go to another class and I'll go to anybody's class that happens to be available. If I've trained them it doesn't matter I'll still go to their class providing they'll let me! There's always something to learn. I never come away without learning something.

Q Do you teach internationally?

Liz - Yes, I've taught in Canada and a lot in Ireland. I started off the Iyengar teacher training courses in Ireland in 1992 and introduced Ashtanga Vinyasa over there about 8 years ago.

Q You've taught at The Maze Prison in Ireland. What was that like? Were the prisoners surprised by your strength and flexibility?

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Liz - Yes, when they came to class they thought there would be these women who would be all soft and silly. I got them doing Ashtanga Vinyasa and they found out otherwise! They were knackered but they were really interested and they wanted to do more and more. They worked very, very hard. They were very focused and very diligent with their practice. I taught them for 2 years in the early 1990's and now The Maze is closed and some of them are out teaching.

Q Why did you settle in Cornwall?

Liz - I hated London. I hated the pollution. There were no Yoga teachers in Penzance at the time, and now there are some very good ones. I started getting teachers to come down and do workshops here. I had Mr Iyengar visit in 1984. A lot of teachers come to visit because it's a very beautiful place. Shandor Remete did really intensive

start my practice at about 7 am, and I don't see the point of starting any earlier. It is also important to consider that in India it gets very hot so they practise before the heat of the day. In England we should practise with the sun, earlier in summer and later in winter. It's important to match your practice to your environment.

Q With its growing popularity, do you think that Ashtanga Vinyasa has changed in the way that it's been taught?

Liz - It's become big business now and people are setting up training courses with 30, 40 or 50 students. That can never be right. I'll only take a maximum of 16. You've got to keep classes small, intensive, with really good group dynamics for it to really work and for people to get the right quality of teaching. In a large class you might as well be practising on your own because you don't get that student/teacher contact anymore.

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Q Do you think Ashtanga Vinyasa has any negative aspects?

Liz - The downside of the Ashtanga Vinyasa practice is that it does attract people who are a bit fanatical, who swap one obsession for another. It does seem to attract a lot of people who really shouldn't be doing it, a lot of anorexics for example. They're doing it because it helps them get even thinner. I've seen a lot of people in class whose upper part of their arms are thinner than the lower part of their arms and whose thighs are thinner than their calves. I think it is

workshops with us. Silva Mehta also did several workshops here. So many teachers, the list goes on.

Q With the Ashtanga system being based in Mysore in India, what is the route to becoming a teacher over there?

Liz - In Mysore people have to go through the first and second series and be into the third and then ask if they can be given a certificate. They then pay a large sum of money and receive one. I actually find that in the West the standard of some teachers is far higher than the standard in India. People think just because Yoga comes from India the teaching has got to be good there. One of the best teachers I know, Danny Paradise, has never been to Mysore. He's the person who introduced Yoga to the likes of Sting because he was a musician for Sting. Sometimes in the West people think it's very mystic but in India, people just accept Yoga. A lot of the people in India say 'oh yeah, they're a Yoga teacher' and then the person comes over to the West and it's 'oh guru, guru' and they bow. Just because they're Indian, just because they wear the robes, they are an enlightened being. I don't think so!

Q Have you ever been to Mysore to study with Pattabhi Jois?

Liz - My teacher, Graham Northfield, advised me against it because of the injuries that I have. He said that the classes are too full and the students don't get enough individual attention now. He feels it has become too commercialised. I don't think I would like the early mornings. Some Ashtanga Vinyasa teachers get up at 3 or 4 am to do their practice, and then teach after that. I

irresponsible of the teachers to allow them to do a full primary series if they are like that, because they just end up robbing the body too much. They need a softer practice. There are a lot of people who, because they are doing such a strong practice in the Ashtanga Vinyasa do not have periods, so it means it's not that easy to conceive. So you get conflict about the tight abdomen, with the pressure of the media to have a very tight core. It puts too much pressure on the body, especially women's bodies where there should be a little bit of softness and a bit of flexibility. There shouldn't be any hardness and aggression in Ashtanga Vinyasa but I have seen it a lot. The practice should be soft and flowing, strong. There's strength in softness. If only people realised that.

Q Do you think these unbalanced attitudes and egos come from people practising only one of the eight limbs of the Ashtanga Vinyasa? They are only practising the physical side. There doesn't seem to be much emphasis in Ashtanga Vinyasa classes on the full eight limbs of the Yoga does there?

Liz - That's where it's lacking but then a lot of other systems are lacking that as well. You go along to the average class and they hardly ever mention the breath and they certainly don't mention the philosophy. This is in the average class but you get the senior teachers and they do mention them. We cover Yoga philosophy in the teacher training classes. There's a great philosophy teacher called Dr Christa-Maria Herrmann. She has written books and travels throughout the world. She's great. We also have a physiotherapist from the local

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hospital teaching anatomy and physiology on the course.

Q You hear of people doing Ashtanga Vinyasa practice who, because the practice is very strong physically, develop greater degrees of anger. How do you deal with this?

Liz - I make them slow down and soften rather than

being so hard and aggressive. I have to see the individual to see how they practise. You can get some men come in with a lovely soft attitude and a lovely soft practice and you can get some women coming in with a very hard aggressive practice which they are determined to follow at all costs. The softness and the yielding have got to be

there. Softness and strength, so they're not being physically violent to their own body. I see a lot of physical violence in the Ashtanga Vinyasa system and in the Iyengar system but that's to do with the individuals.

Q Do you ever get stressed?

Liz - A little but not very often. Do I get stressed that much Gauté?

Gauté - I don't think so. You have a tendency sometimes to get a little high. I mean when you are getting too involved in wanting to teach. That's why you become slightly high but it's not really stress.

Liz - I can cope very well with stress and that's definitely because of the Yoga.

Q Do you think diet is important?

Liz - Absolutely, incredibly.

Q Do you advocate a vegetarian diet for Yoga?

Liz - I eat fish but it's up to the individual but I think what they should eat should be good quality, organic food. I think quality is very important in diet. If I'm out somewhere and somebody is eating a steak that's their problem, it's not mine. It's up to them if they want to have a steak and chips and two pints of beer. Then when they come into the class the next day and they can't do the twists, I will laugh at them and I won't be that compassionate; you did it to yourself! Then they start to realise and people do become more careful with their diet because you are what you eat. We've had people who have come here who have had the ability but they weren't willing to change their diet. They go back and they eat too much, they drink too much and they don't practise. When they come back here a week later, or a month later on the next course, they've stuck where they were at the beginning. You can get someone else who began from a similar starting point but because they've taken everything on board, they've progressed. So one feels quite good about their progress and the other feels bad.

Q What's your personal approach to teaching? Do you think it differs from other people's?

Liz - Well I have a great deal of love and joy for teaching but I think you'd have to ask Gaute that.

Gauté - She makes me laugh because when I was young I went to military police school and thought that was quite something but I forgot about that after I met Liz!

Liz - 'Exacting', that's the word! People have said that when they've gone off to Iyengar and when they've gone off to other tough teachers like Faiq Biria and Shandor they've said, "they're not a patch on you. You've prepared us well for them!"

Gauté - I think that Liz has so much knowledge she can see what your body can take. So if you don't mentally want to go along with that she doesn't care because she will continue reading your body. She will see only your body and the colour of your eyes and not regard what you think at the moment. That will stretch you far beyond what you would normally do to yourself.

Liz - It's taking people to their maximum. There was an example in the class today with one of the teachers who'd been to an Osteopath who'd told her not to do this, not to do the other. She was jamming up in the neck

so I allowed her the space but I was quite insistent that she would do it. Now I would not be like that with people on a Yoga holiday who've come to enjoy, but this was a teaching group. It was a master class for the teachers for them to progress, so it was my job to make her lose that fear which empowered her. She can go on and think this is not so bad. Not hold the memory of something that caused discomfort two years ago. What happens is the memory is there and a fear pattern sets in. People need to break that fear pattern and realise that every day is a new day and ask, what will my body allow me to do today? Can I soften into a pose? And if there is pain, what's causing it? People can back off too quickly from pain instead of thinking, yes can I soften? If people allow themselves just to relax and to soften, a lot of the time pain will go away. People get very frightened and some of the fears aren't physical, they're mental. These fears enter their body. Many people like to have pain and illness to stop them progressing because they are fearful of change. You take their pain and illness away and they are left with nothing. But people have to work at achieving this. Yoga isn't for people to do once a week, especially with something like Ashtanga Vinyasa. If they only practise once a week they won't benefit from it. They should practise at least once every other day, if not daily. It's better to do ten minutes a day than to go along once a week to a two hour class. Otherwise you are open to injury because your muscles aren't there to support the system.

Q Should you always stay within your breathing capabilities when you are practising Ashtanga Vinyasa?

Liz - Yes, that's the danger of a led practice when the teacher will impose the breath on a student. If they impose the breath and the student doesn't follow their own comfort in their breathing pattern, this will impose pressure on the heart. They must keep breathing. It's the one thing you've got to do in life, keep breathing! Yoga is nothing if there is no breath and I've been to many classes where they don't mention the breath and that's not Yoga.

Q What provided your motivation to get involved in Yoga and to continue to practise?

Gauté - In skydiving we have certain movements to help increase speed and I couldn't do them. I was too stiff. To keep up with the rest I had to carry 7kgs of lead, which is not really good for your spine. So I wanted to get off the lead! That was my initial motivation. Two classes a week for one winter took me off the lead and I was hooked. I found the teacher training very hard but I'm stubborn I guess. It is so easy to take a day off. That's when you have to become very alone with yourself and establish a routine. I found that very hard but it is something you must choose to do. Ashtanga Vinyasa is a maintenance programme for your body, maybe the best maintenance for your body. If you are going to excel in any field you need to have a fully functioning body and a fully functioning body you can achieve best through Yoga in my view.

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