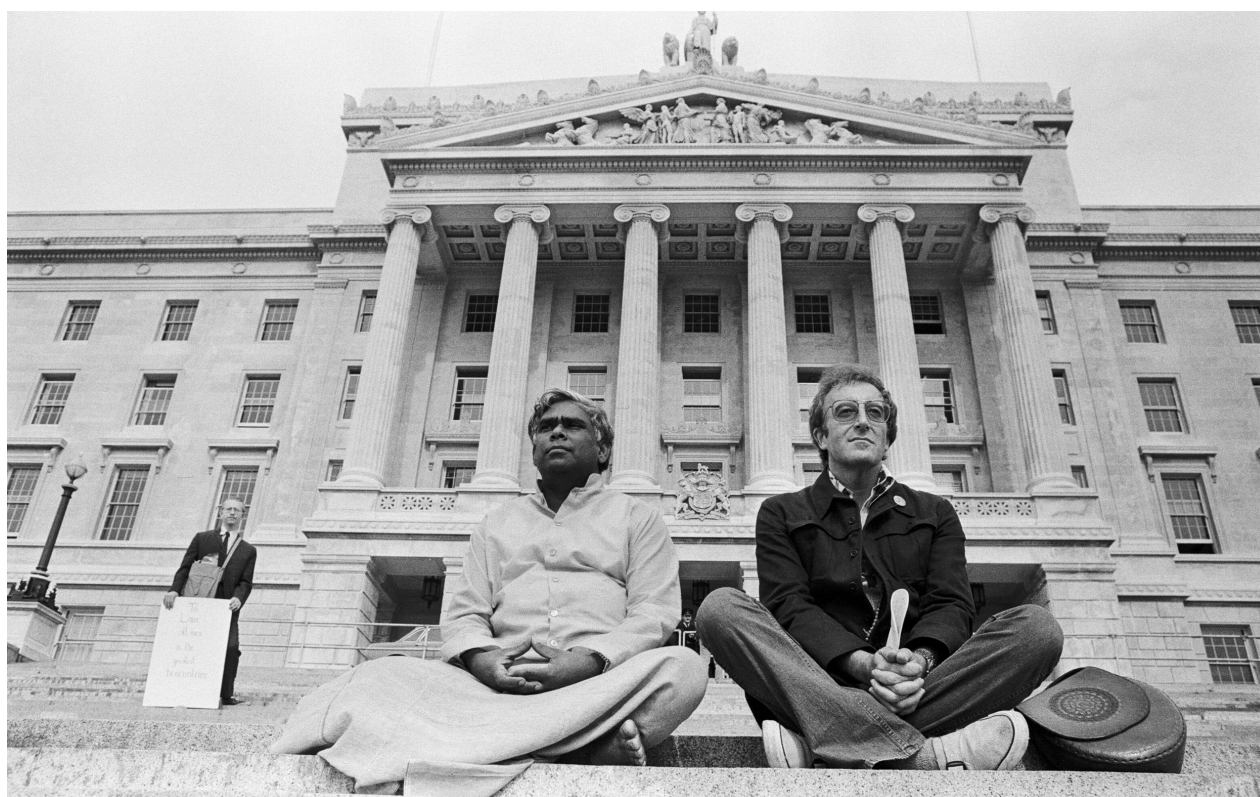


How I uncovered yoga's #MeToo moment

Ishleen Kaur unearthed claims of historic sexual abuse by a celebrity 'guru' and founder of a movement she thought she loved



Peter Sellers was just one of the celebrities who followed the ancient custom CREDIT: MIRRORPIX

By Ishleen Kaur

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Like so many devotees, Pamela stumbled into yoga almost by accident. She was an idealistic 20-year-old in 1978, when she attended a fasting weekend near her home in London, run by the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres, a particularly spiritual expression of the ancient practice. It was based on the teachings of Hindu guru Sivananda, who is said to have wandered the length of India with no possessions in the early 20th Century.

At that 1978 retreat, Pamela remembers being “love-bombed” by members,

who were keen to induct her into their all-consuming world. Soon, she even had the honour of meeting the group's celebrity founder, Vishnudevananda Saraswati, the Guru. He was something of a rockstar within the yoga world, having famously converted The Beatles to the ancient custom and having once flown a 'peace plane' from Boston to Northern Ireland to drop leaflets over Belfast City Hall, as part of an ambitious bid to resolve The Troubles.



Vishnudevananda Saraswati aka the Guru

But a few months later, Pamela was at a group retreat at Windsor Castle when Vishnudevananda asked her to massage him. Few yogis ever rejected the guru's demands, so she obliged for two hours. Then, after a yoga practice, she lay on her back in the 'corpse' position, a state of deep relaxation. It was so hypnotic that Pamela initially didn't notice when Vishnudevananda lay down on top of her. Silently, he began to rape her.

Pamela's story remained largely hidden until December 2019, when a handful of women who spent time in the Sivananda Centres between the 1970s and 1990s came forward on social media with allegations of sexual abuse against Vishnudevananda, the guru whose portrait adorned the walls at yoga studios across the world. It was yoga's MeToo moment, unearthing a dark underbelly of a spiritual way of life that prided itself on purity and sexual abstinence.

I've spent the last 18 months piecing these stories together for my new three-part series for the BBC World Service, *Guru*. It is not just a story of one yoga chief, however monstrous he might have been. It is also a story of power, one in which Vishnudevanda's semi-divine authority allowed him to abuse for years, largely unquestioned.

I spoke to 14 survivors, and was struck by the almost-eerie similarity of many of their stories. Most discovered Sivananda yoga during a difficult time in their twenties. Sivananda offered direction and certainty, allowing them to devote their lives to a higher, more profound cause.

Their accounts struck a chord. It was a path that I very nearly followed, too. I spent six years at the heart of Sivananda yoga, starting in my mid-twenties after a particularly sour break-up. I was living in Mumbai at the time, with few friends. Sivananda brought a strange sense of internal peace. After meditating I felt I could go anywhere, do anything. I was so invested that in 2014 I spent one month training as a volunteer yoga instructor at the Sivananda centre in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

After moving to west London with my husband in 2015, I quickly became involved with the Sivananda centre in Putney, southwest London. It soon dominated my life. I would spend all day at the centre, teaching classes and cooking meals. They charged yogis for classes, but I was never paid. My husband would ask, "How can you believe them so blindly? They're charging people but give you nothing. I would defend them vociferously. It was a charity, I replied; it wasn't about the money.



Ishleen Kaur at Sivananda centre in Putney

But my infatuation ended abruptly on the evening of 10th December 2019. From my west London living room, I opened my laptop and spotted a nine-paragraph post on a Facebook group for Sivananda teachers based in the UK. It was written by 63-year-old Julie Salter, a yogi who worked as personal assistant for Vishnudevananda from 1982 until his death in 1993.

“With all the hagiography around ... Vishnudevananda and his legacy, with all the wistful wishes, beliefs, and projections, and looking at the ‘good’ done, let’s also face into at least a little of the hidden, the dark,” she wrote.

Beneath her post, a number of other women piled in with their own accounts of Vishnudevananda’s abuse. Horrified, I shut my laptop. It felt like my living room walls were closing in. It marked the end of my time with the Sivananda centre, a cause to which I’d devoted so much of my life.

Salter, she later told me, had grown up in New Zealand, with a profound love of nature and a zeal for environmental activism. She first encountered the Sivananda way of life in Israel in 1976, when she was 20, shortly after a stay on a Kibbutz farm. She met Vishnudevananda in Tel Aviv, and was quickly pulled into his orbit. She moved to the Sivananda headquarters in Canada; eventually, she was Vishnudevananda’s personal assistant. She worked seven days each week, 5am till midnight. Exhausted, she became a “ghost”, losing

her sense of self. Vishnudevananda's erratic mood swings didn't help; one minute he would "love-bomb" her, the next he would shout at her for minor mistakes.

One afternoon, Salter walked into Vishnudevananda's house to check on him. He was upstairs, lying on his floor, listening to devotional tapes. He asked Julie to lie down next to him, she claims. "In spite of everything in my body saying no, and my brain crying out no, I did," she remembers and then he had sex with her - she told me she now realises it was rape. "Everything was shaking inside me; my mind was exploding," she remembers. "[I was] ashamed of myself for crossing a line I felt I shouldn't have crossed."

She says Vishnudevananda repeatedly assaulted her over the next three years. Separated from family, and with no financial independence, she was too terrified to leave. Towards the end of 1980s, Vishnudevananda suffered a mini stroke, and his physical dependence on Salter grew. "I wanted him to die; I couldn't take it anymore," she told me. It was only in 1999, six years after Vishnudevananda's death, that Salter felt confident enough to leave. She was diagnosed with insomnia and physical exhaustion. "I do believe I was very close to dying by the time I left." She was forced to make her way in a strange and frightening world, with no financial means or marketable skills. Today, Julie finds peace & comfort in nature and that is what she says nourishes her and grounds her.

A spokesperson from Sivananda has told the BBC that "The Board of Trustees fully sympathises with those who came forward and offers any individual who feels that they might have been affected by the conduct referred to in the programme its assurance that it will not tolerate abuse or disregard inappropriate behaviour. It apologises unreservedly for any historic mistakes which it made in addressing the allegations detailed in the programme. As a result of those allegations, the Sivananda Organisation has commissioned an independent investigation, and has appointed legal experts who have helped to review and implement safeguarding policies, and put in place appropriate training. The Sivananda Organisation has established a confidential reporting facility for anyone who is concerned about abuse. It is an absolute priority for the Sivananda Organisation that anyone coming into contact with it, in whatever capacity, is safeguarded from abuse or suffering. The Sivananda Organisation is a monastic order dedicated to physical, mental, and spiritual health and is committed to the

safety of all of its members.”

I still practice yoga alone in my living room, but after hearing the harrowing tales of survivors like Salter, I’m not sure I could go back to a formal yoga institution. There seems to me something concerning about the “guru-disciple” relationship that lies at the heart of Sivananda, and other yoga networks. When men are worshipped like gods, dark things can happen.

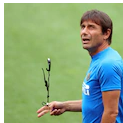
I’m just glad I got out when I did.

As told to Luke Mintz

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