



# The Yoga Quit

How a Korean guru has created a fanatical following on college campuses that is part Moonies, part New Age boot camp and pure profit By Sabrina Rubin Erdely

**I**F YOU LOOKED AT IT FROM A CERTAIN PERSPECTIVE, the exercises Amy Shipley did in Dahn Yoga were perfectly normal. Take what she was doing right now. It was near midnight. Amy and seven other devotees of Dahn Yoga – nearly all in their 20s, clad in blue tracksuits and barely functioning on three hours of sleep – were standing in a waist-deep fountain in the desert of Sedona, Arizona. On command from their Korean trainer, all eight would plunge their heads underwater and hold their breath until their lungs strained, finally rocketing to the surface gasping and shouting a devotional song to their Grand Master – a middle-aged Korean man called Ilchi Lee – and weeping to prove their sincerity. Then they'd be ordered to do it again, and *properly* this time. In this way, Amy and the others were saving their souls and rescuing the world from annihilation.

See? Totally normal. Amy loved tests. She'd always been Type-A like that, an overachiever, first in line for any challenge. And Dahn Yoga gave her endless tests to pass, especially here at its isolated Arizona retreat where, round the clock, members performed all kinds of mysterious rituals. Certain exercises had taken some getting used to, of course. Like the one where they'd turn off the lights and everyone would dance and scream for hours, until they collapsed in a sobbing heap. Or just earlier today, when Amy had been ordered to mash her face in the dirt as a lesson in humility. A 24-year-old blond Midwesterner who had been a homecoming princess of her Indiana high school, Amy was now a pro at such practices: At a previous workshop that lasted for 10 days, she and a dozen others had begun each morning by punching themselves in the stomach while hollering things like "I am stupid!" For that privilege, Amy had paid \$8,500.

Illustration by SEAN MCCABE

Two years earlier, Amy and her boyfriend, Ricardo Barba, had been ordinary juniors at the University of Illinois when they visited a campus fitness club that taught a meld of yoga and tai chi. Now, by spring 2008, they were sleep-deprived, celibate soul warriors who considered Ilchi Lee their “spiritual father.” In pursuit of the enlightenment Lee promised, they and thousands of other young American disciples dedicated 80-hour workweeks and astonishing amounts of money to Dahn Yoga. Amy was \$47,000 in debt for her training, having maxed out credit cards and student loans at the urging of her masters. Again, totally normal: Many who progressed in Dahn had mountains of debt, especially those lucky older members with homes to mortgage – an asset that came in handy when paying for Dahn’s holiest seminar, which cost \$100,000.

Amy broke through the water’s surface again and launched into song, careful to keep a smile on her face as tears rolled down her cheeks. Suddenly, she was struck with a rare moment of clarity. She didn’t understand how this exercise was promoting world peace. She felt ridiculous. She was exhausted. She missed Ricardo, who was back in Chicago cleaning yoga-studio toilets and doing penance for his

“I was a good little cult member,” says one former Dahn disciple. “I would have drunk Kool-Aid laced with cyanide if they told me to. I would have done anything.”

inability to “create” money. *What the hell am I doing?* Amy wondered. But no sooner did the thought enter her mind than she squelched it the way her masters had taught her: When in doubt, commit yourself even harder. She slammed her face into the chilly water until her reservations dissipated. At the end of this week’s training, Amy herself would be crowned a Dahn master and awarded her heavenly assignment: to recruit 20 new members and raise \$20,000 for Dahn Yoga each month.

“I was a good little cult member,” Amy says today. “I would have drunk Kool-Aid laced with cyanide if they told me to. I would have chopped off my right arm. I would have done anything.”

GIVEN THE DEVOTION many Americans feel for yoga, it was just a matter of time before someone hatched the idea for a yoga cult. But at Dahn Yoga, a 25-year-old Korean organization, there are no downward-dog poses, no sun salutations. At the group’s

SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY wrote “The Girl Who Conned the Ivy League” in *RS 1080*.

127 fitness centers nationwide, practitioners train in martial arts, engage in a head-shaking meditation known as “brain wave vibration” that is best performed while holding palm-size rubber vibrating brains (\$80 per pair) and, after class, discuss their feelings in a “sharing circle.” In fact, Dahn’s calling itself “yoga” is just a marketing ploy to enhance its appeal to Americans, who make up some 10,000 of the 500,000 members the group claims worldwide. Many are supermotivated kids, like Amy Shipley and Ricardo Barba, who are recruited from college campuses, along with a healthy dose of older rich folks whom the group privately calls “VIPs.” Last year, Dahn Yoga pulled in an estimated \$30 million in the United States alone – and that’s only a fraction of its 1,000 franchises across nine countries.

But critics say this lucrative fitness craze has a dark side. “Dahn is a destructive mind-control cult, very similar to the Moonies,” says Steven Hassan, author of *Combating Cult Mind Control*, who has counseled many ex-Dahn members. A federal lawsuit filed last year by 27 former members, including Shipley and Barba, goes a step further, claiming that Dahn is not only a cult, but that the profits generated by its brainwashed masses fund the

rock-star lifestyle of Seung Heun “Ilchi” Lee, a paunchy, white-haired 57-year-old who travels the globe via private jet and is orbited by a worshipful entourage of personal assistants. Lee’s disciples, meanwhile, live in communal housing, go deep into debt to meet financial quotas and say they are driven to exercise to an extreme degree. (In 2008, Dahn settled a lawsuit for an undisclosed sum when a college professor named Julia Siverls died of dehydration while hiking a Sedona mountain, allegedly lugging 25 pounds of rocks in her backpack.) The current lawsuit also accuses Lee of breaking wage and immigration laws, evading taxes and sexually abusing female disciples, who are assured they’re being singled out for a sacred honor.

Dahn Yoga denies the lawsuit’s allegations. “It’s ridiculous, all of it,” says Dahn spokesman Joseph Alexander. “This lawsuit came as a shock to us. We’re not just a corporation – these are our close friends.” Through his lawyer, Ilchi Lee has also denied any wrongdoing, and Lee has pointed out that he is no longer part of Dahn’s corporate structure but serves only as a “consultant” – which is technically true. But ex-members say that obscuring

Lee’s leadership of the group is just part of the pattern of deception, much like the pricey, “energy-cleansing,” gold-painted jewelry that Dahn sells.

The deceit can begin at the front door, since the Dahn brand name (Korean for “energy”) is notably absent from some of its storefronts. Dahn’s studio in New York calls itself Tao Yoga, and its affiliated retreat centers in Sedona, the Catskill Mountains and British Columbia bill themselves as holistic wellness spas. The 22 “Body and Brain Clubs” that Dahn disciples run on college campuses are initially quiet about their relationship to the group, even though their founder claims that the whole point is to funnel kids into Dahn. “College students are the perfect recruits,” says Lucie Vogel, who started the first Body and Brain Club in 2001 while a student at MIT. “The goal was to get them to become Dahn masters and devote their lives to Dahn.” In 2007, after Vogel tried to make her local Dahn center “less like a cult” – shortening workdays, allowing employees to date – Ilchi Lee ordered her to go to Sedona to “recover my mind.” Vogel, who left the group and became a plaintiff in the lawsuit, found herself \$140,000 in debt.

The lawsuit, still in its early stages, has plunged Dahn into damage-control mode

to protect its carefully crafted image. Taking a page from Scientology’s playbook, Dahn has positioned itself not as a gooey spiritual movement but as cutting-edge science it calls “brain education,” with the power to sharpen memory, prevent cancer and even give practitioners extrasensory powers. As a result of such claims, two universities have awarded Lee honorary doctorates, 15 American cities have declared “Ilchi Lee days,” and the Dahn Foundation, whose sole mission is to spread the practice of Dahn Yoga, enjoys tax-exempt status from the IRS. Lee lectures at international brain seminars – hosted by the Korea Institute of Brain Science, of which Lee is founder and president – and in August, he held a “Brain Art Festival” at Radio City Music Hall. The hype has helped pave the way for a new product line: “brain education” programs for children. Clients often have no clue who they’re dealing with, as when New York paid \$400,000 to PowerBrain Education, another Dahn-affiliated operation, to teach “brain wave vibration” workshops in 44 public schools. One elementary school, PS 65 in the Bronx, even got a lesson from Ilchi Lee himself.

“These are people with no boundaries,” says Vogel. “Anything is justifiable as long as it brings in a buck.”

A MY SHIPLEY WASN’T LOOKING for enlightenment when, in the fall of 2006, she walked into the Body and Brain Club at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She just wanted to lose five pounds. “That’s my issue,” she says. “I’m always five pounds overweight.” Her boyfriend, fellow junior Ricardo Barba,

It was a Dahn Yoga center. The crowd of twentysomethings all danced to techno for an hour, then sat on the padded floor of the bright yellow studio for a deep-breathing exercise. Amy, still panting, felt herself sink into a blissful state of relaxation. “Feel your heart,” the instructor intoned, and in a cathartic moment, Amy did – she could feel its shape, its bigness. “It was incredible!” she later told Ricardo. Together they started attending classes at the Dahn center.

While Amy and Ricardo never considered themselves cult fodder, they now

The Converts

As college students, Ricardo Barba and Amy Shipley devoted themselves to Dahn Yoga (1). Amy recruited for the sect on the streets of Chicago (2) and immersed herself in Dahn techniques (3).



PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO FOR ILLUSTRATION BY YOUNHAP NEWS AGENCY; THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF AMY SHIPLEY, 3

had taken a class at the student-run club and called Amy afterward: “Babygirl, I could feel this energy – it was *craazy!*” he gushed. Amy headed to the Rec Center to catch the next Body and Brain session. She was disappointed by the workout, a slow-moving tai chi lesson led by a Chinese physics nerd. But Ricardo was jazzed about it, and the classes were free, so Amy kept going. Then one day, the instructor invited her to a Halloween party.

“Here’s this dorky kid inviting me to a party,” Amy thought. “How funny!” The night of the party, she slipped into a white, low-cut Marilyn Monroe dress and headed to the off-campus address she’d been given.

realize otherwise: “It’s like we were wearing ‘Recruit Me’ signs on our backs,” Ricardo says. The pair had met two years earlier at the library. Ricardo, dark-haired, lean and kinetic, was a first-generation Mexican-American still living at home in Chicago’s West Town neighborhood, where he graduated valedictorian of his Jesuit high school. Now at UIC, Ricardo was intent on entering politics to serve the city’s Hispanic community. Despite their divergent backgrounds, he found a kindred spirit in Amy, who grew up in a white-bread Indiana town and had come to Chicago to major in education, work as an inner-city tutor and take on the “civil rights

movement of our generation” – closing the education gap for people of color. She and Ricardo were idealistic, brimming with energy and, like many kids their age, on a quest for identity and purpose. Attending classes at Dahn, Ricardo was amazed at the unexpected ways they helped him peel back his own layers. Like how in one exercise, his instructor turned to Ricardo and commanded, “Sing a song!”

“Uh,” Ricardo hesitated. “That’s how you live your life,” the instructor snapped. “Too much thinking, not enough acting!” Ricardo was floored. When their Dahn instructors suggested Ricardo and Amy sign up for a two-day “Shim Sung workshop” to uncover their “true selves,” they readily agreed. The \$200 fee didn’t include the price of the uniform, a white martial-arts outfit with balloon-legged pants that made them both snicker. But once they were standing among the two dozen excited participants, the clothes didn’t seem so bad. The workshop consisted of hours of loud and fast exercise, trust-building games and lots of personal confessions, all performed to rousing music. Attitude was everything. Asked to hold a pose, they held it for as long as 30 minutes, while their instructors yelled, “This is what it feels like to give 100 percent!”

Amy and Ricardo did everything asked of them at Shim Sung – including, when they each returned home on Saturday night, promising not to break the spell of self-discovery by talking. They stayed up late writing the autobiographical essays they’d been assigned. Amy wrote about how her father had flitted in and out of her childhood and the hole that had left in her life. Ricardo, whose parents emigrated to Chicago from Mexico, wrote about being the first in his family to go to college and how badly he wanted to make his parents proud.

The next morning, their Dahn instructors collected the essays – soon to be shared with all the Chicago masters. What Ricardo and Amy didn’t realize was that the true purpose of the Shim Sung exercise was to help Dahn’s leaders identify recruits who might become big revenue producers. “If you thought someone had potential for money, you’d try to get them to go to the Shim Sung workshop,” recalls Benjamin Greene, who became a master in L.A. before “escaping” in 2008. “When I was at Shim Sung, I was keeping track of my members and how much they opened up. If they didn’t open up, they didn’t have as much potential. But if they opened up, the sky’s the limit.” Instructors, he adds, were taught to capitalize on that potential as fast as possible: “When they’re suggestible like that, you try to sell them on something else. Ideally, you’ve signed them up for the next workshop before they even go home.”

Amy and Ricardo emerged from Shim Sung exhausted but exhilarated. Their Dahn instructors had heaps of sugges-

tions about how to build on their progress: more classes, more workshops, more one-on-one “healing sessions,” all of which the couple readily signed on for. Amy and Ricardo even agreed to help clean the Dahn center, spending their evenings mopping the floor while a candle burned in front of a framed photograph of some white-haired Korean dude. Their instructors told them he was Dahn’s founder. Perhaps one day they’d be lucky enough to meet him.

**I**LCHI LEE’S VISAGE APPEARS IN every Dahn Yoga center. He is usually shown dressed in a dark business suit with no tie, his round, unlined face beaming tranquility. Dahn instructors are initially vague when discussing his identity with new members. That’s on purpose, say ex-masters: Instructors are taught to “make it fit their brains” – that is, to tell members only as much as their minds can handle. At first, Lee is referred to as Dahn’s founder. Next, he’s the author of a book recommended to you. Then he’s revealed as the calm voice speaking in Korean on the CD playing during your workout. If you’re truly fortunate, he might be the man making a rare personal appearance, arriving amid great fanfare as all the masters reverently scurry around, careful never to step on his shadow. It can take a couple of years, ex-members say, before they’re informed of Lee’s true identity as the font of universal energy upon which we all draw.

“We believed he was like God,” says former member Jade Harrelson. Lee himself is more modest; in a 2005 training manual, he compared himself merely to Buddha.

Like most cult leaders, Lee’s story follows the classic line of the charismatic con man. As a child in South Korea, Lee’s grades were a disappointment to his father, a schoolteacher; the boy’s mind was so scattered, he could scarcely pay attention to his lessons. But Lee gradually found that moving his body helped him to focus. He threw himself into martial arts and excelled. He made it through school, married and took a job as a lab technician. But by age 28, Lee felt unfulfilled. In his own retelling, he hiked to the top of Moak Mountain in 1980 and meditated for 21 days, neither eating nor sleeping, until he was hit with the revelation that he was composed of cosmic energy, energy with no beginning and no end. This was his moment of enlightenment. Lee descended the mount to spread the good word.

He changed his name to Ilchi, or one who is “pointing the way,” and taught mind-body exercises in a park, gradually developing a following. In 1985, he opened his first Dahn center in Seoul. From there, Lee moved at a relentless pace, touring Korea and opening centers across the country. Left behind were his wife and two young sons. Lee wasn’t worried, he told followers, since he had asked the heavens to look after



**The Great Leader**

**(1)** Dahn founder Ilchi Lee at one of the group’s Arizona centers. **(2)** Lee with Dahn master Lucie Vogel, who has since left the organization, calling it a “cult.” **(3)** Former Dahn member Jade Harrelson alleges that Lee coerced her into sex.

them: “From that moment onward, I forgot my family and focused solely on ‘vision.’” His single-mindedness was astonishing. Once, as Lee was leaving for Korea’s Jeju Island – a tropical vacation spot – he received word that his younger son had been in a car crash. “If he was meant to live, he will, and if he was meant to die, he will,” Lee said. Then he hung up and got on the plane. (The boy, apparently, was meant to live.) Lee expected the same level of commitment from his members; former followers say that as part of the standard ceremony to be elevated to Dahn masters, they were required to recite a pledge vowing to die for Ilchi Lee if necessary.

The actual theology that members were required to spread was a little shaky. For a while, Lee promised followers that once they had harnessed enough energy through something called “brain respiration,” they would fly to an “enlightenment star” aboard a spaceship shaped like a golden turtle. (He ran a brisk business selling \$4,000 golden turtle statues meant to harness cosmic energy.) Later on, he spoke of the need to recruit 100 million “new humans,” at which point this critical mass of Dahn followers would somehow create world peace. After that, he began preaching the healing powers of “brain wave vibration” and of smiling

the “HSP (health, smile, peace) smile.” But in the end, theology didn’t matter; what mattered was that everyone felt united for a greater purpose – and that they were kept too busy to think it through. In that regard, Lee reportedly had help from Hwa Young Moon, a Korean woman who joined Dahn in the late 1980s and whipped it into shape; she knew a good deal about the enlightenment trade, having grown up in the “Moonies,” the Unification Church.

Like any success story, Dahn had its growing pains. In 1993, a Korean court convicted Lee of violating real estate laws, distributing medical supplies without a license and falsely billing Dahn as a college; he was sentenced to two and a half years in jail, of which he served 70 days. In 1999, the celebrated Korean poet Jiha Kim, a onetime Dahn member, held a press conference and claimed that at least 200 women had been fondled by Lee under the guise of spiritual training. (Lee has denied all claims of sexual misconduct.) Kim went on to call Dahn a “criminal enterprise,” likening it to a Stalinist regime.

Lee was undeterred. He already had a plan under way to spread Dahn beyond Korea to the rest of the world. Lee established a nonprofit, Tao Fellowship, which in turn bought a huge parcel of land in

Sedona, Arizona, an area famous for its spectacular “red rocks” and their supposed mystical powers; Lee called his swath of juniper-studded desert Mago (“Mother Earth”) Garden and designated it the epicenter of his American empire. Lee and his affiliates also bought a nearby RV park for Mago Garden’s future residents, several Arizona residences, an expansive headquarters for the “Ilchi Center for Brain Research” and a glass-walled mountain-top house with a breathtaking 360-degree view, for which, Lee bragged, he had outbid Nicolas Cage, who wanted it for his bride, Lisa Marie Presley.

Next, Lee dispatched devoted Dahn masters to the new corporate nerve center in Sedona. It took a while for the Korean crew to figure out the mind-set of its new American market. The big problem was that Americans bristled at being told what to do – Korean Dahn involved a lot of barked orders. So Dahn instructed its American masters to adopt a softer approach. In an even bigger breakthrough, it added “Yoga” to its name, repackaging its central goal from seeking enlightenment to pursuing “personal growth.” A master in L.A. even arranged screenings of *The Matrix*, telling members that, like Neo, they were living in an artificial reality – but that

they were taking a workshop called Power Brain Method, learning that their minds were cluttered with meaningless “information” sponged up throughout their lives. But thanks to the wonders of neuroplasticity – the weekend’s buzzword – their brains could be reprogrammed. First, however, they needed to clean their mental closets by dismissing their attachments out loud. Amy was going at it with her usual gusto:

*My attachment to Ricardo is not me, it’s just my information. By acknowledging it, I am letting go of it.*

Ricardo looked at his own page, where he’d written *family* but not *Amy*. He was losing her to Dahn. He had realized she was outpacing him after their very first Sedona workshop. It had been an emotional weekend; one exercise involved pretending you were staring at your own dead body – really, your partner draped in black cloth – and considering the question *What do you want to say to your body? Are you happy with the life you lived?*

“I’m so sorry!” Amy had wailed to her dead self. Ricardo had been moved too, but part of him had held back. He was committed to Dahn’s mission – creating energy that would heal the world – but he was starting to have his doubts. First of all, his instructors were pressuring him to quit

relationship no longer seemed a priority, she brushed him off. “That’s just your negative thinking,” she responded in Dahn-speak.

She loved Ricardo, but she had more important things to think about, especially now that she was ready to graduate college. She informed her mother that she was no longer interested in teaching inner-city children – she had learned through Dahn that her previous goals had been petty and small. Instead, Amy sat through her convocation thinking of nothing but her reverence for Ilchi Lee. She was ready, at last, to become a Dahn master.

“Becoming a Dahn master means dedicating your life to Ilchi Lee,” Amy says. “Everything I had would be for him. I would no longer be a regular person – I would become one of Ilchi’s people.”

The Sedona training program for masters varied each year, but one constant remained: Candidates had to prove how much they were willing to endure for Dahn. In the past, its climax had been a grueling seven-mile mountain hike with up to 40 pounds of rocks in your backpack. But after Julia Siverls collapsed on the trek in 2003 – her teammates reportedly praying over her body as she died – Dahn tried other means of testing its candidates: making them drink toilet water, licking each

“We believed Ilchi Lee was like God,” one former Dahn member says of the cult’s leader. Lee himself is more modest; he compares himself merely to Buddha.

with her help, Dahn Yoga would open their eyes. “I am Morpheus,” she would solemnly tell them, then press **PLAY**.

By the time Amy and Ricardo joined, Lee’s enterprise had grown into a mini-empire. Visitors to Sedona, after being bused down 11 miles of bumpy, barren road, would crest a hill and be awed by a majestic, mountain-ringed oasis dotted with man-made ponds, cabins and a modern exercise facility. Across this strange and beautiful panorama hurried antlike Dahn students – most of them young, white and good-looking – in matching martial-arts uniforms and beatific HSP smiles, clutching Ilchi Lee’s books as they busily dashed to their next activity.

**M**Y ATTACHMENT TO BECOMING a teacher is not me, it’s just my information. By acknowledging it, I am letting go of it.

Amy, cross-legged on the floor, read in a monotone from a sheet of paper, her voice almost swallowed by the buzz of the crowded studio. Ricardo watched her from across the room. They’d been Dahn members for more than a year now. Today

school. And he was worried about money – as his masters kept reminding him, devoting money to Dahn was a crucial sign of spiritual progress. Then there was the problem of his family. Dahn members were expected to separate from nonbelievers, but Ricardo didn’t want to push his family away. Not only was he still living at home, but he still wanted to make them proud.

“They don’t understand – *this* is the way you’re going to make them proud,” Ricardo’s masters reasoned with him. “Your parents are just your flesh parents. Ilchi Lee is your spiritual father.”

Amy was a model pupil, a star recruiter who spent hours handing out pamphlets in the Chicago streets while wearing a pair of feathery wings and flirting with passers-by. When a master told her she needed to hand over \$13,000 as part of her “money training,” Amy didn’t question it. She took out loans, including one co-signed by a Dahn instructor – a routine practice, say ex-masters. Amy also obliged when her master instructed her to spend less time with Ricardo. Relationships and sex were Dahn no-nos, and Amy began keeping to her own side of the bed. When Ricardo tried to talk to her about the way their re-

lationship no longer seemed a priority, she brushed him off. “That’s just your negative thinking,” she responded in Dahn-speak.

Having survived their training, newly minted masters were encouraged to move into communal apartments and were given their sacred task, or “vision.” Nothing in Dahn is more important than vision, as a training manual makes clear: “The first value of life is vision. The second value of life is vision. The third value of life is vision.” Vision, former members say, is simply the amount of money that masters are expected to bring into Dahn each month, as well as the number of members they recruit. In a recorded lecture he gave to New York masters last April, Lee himself reinforced the primacy of vision. “You have to go crazy about two things,” he instructed. “One is, you have to go crazy for your members. And second, you have to be crazy about money.” This “vision,” Lee emphasized, [*Cont. on 66*]

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JON PELLETER/VERDE VALLEY NEWSPAPERS, INC.; COURTESY OF LUCIE VOGEL; COURTESY OF JADE HARRELSON

[Cont. from 55] must be “more precious than your life.”

Failing to achieve one’s vision was considered a grave spiritual lapse – and masters obsessively checked Dahn’s online database, which tallied every dollar brought in. “The pressure was intense,” says Greene, the former master, whose California center took in \$30,000 a month. “Literally all you could think about was how much money you had yet to raise.” Masters scrambled to sell everything they could: \$10,000 Sedona workshops, \$1,500 annual memberships, \$1,000 weekend retreats, \$200 private healing sessions, plus books, CDs, even Ilchi Lee’s own happy-face calligraphy. But no matter how well they did in any given month, the calendar turned over, and their totals dropped to zero again. It was a never-ending treadmill.

Having achieved the title of Dahn master, Amy pushed herself to the limit. Each morning she woke at 4 a.m. to meditate, shaking her head back and forth to connect with Ilchi Lee’s energy, as she had been taught, and praying to make her monthly quota of \$20,000 and 20 members. Then she would begin her packed day of teaching classes, conducting “healing sessions,” coaxing people into memberships and attending staff meetings before heading home at 11 p.m. There was no time to sleep, barely time to eat. One day Amy fainted while distributing flyers in Lincoln Park; her superiors approvingly told her she’d been releasing her guilt and shame. A month into her life as a master, Amy was worn out. One morning in July 2008, when she and Ricardo climbed into his beat-up Astro minivan to buy fruit for a workshop, she was glad to just sit and let him drive, the motion soothing her into a half-sleep.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” she said suddenly.

Ricardo looked at her. He’d never seen her so tired. “Say the word, and we’ll go,” he answered.

Amy thought, then shook her head. She’d come too far to give up. Besides, she was about to be awarded her very own ticket to heaven – her “soul name” – personally bestowed upon her by Ilchi Lee. She was about to come face to face with her god.

**I**LCHI LEE WAS LIVING A LIFE QUITE different from that of his disciples. He had a private jet, horse ranches, houses in New Jersey and Arizona, an apartment in Seoul, live-in housekeepers at his primary residence in Sedona and personal chefs to prepare his favorite meals. One disciple who dined with Lee was trained to discreetly remove any food that fell into his lap. Ex-members say that Lee also loved to gamble in Vegas. Not the typical behavior of a guru, but Lee’s assistants already knew that their leader hardly resembled the placid image he projected to the rest

of Dahn; he was a fearsomely impatient and arrogant businessman, intolerant of dissent and obsessed with money.

Lee had officially stepped down from Dahn in 1997, announcing that he would instead serve as a consultant and “patron of Dahnworld” through a company called BR Consulting. According to a former accountant for a Dahn affiliate, Lee’s consulting fee was 30 percent of Dahn’s total income. But whatever his official title, Hun Kim, a former regional director, claims that the founder continues to be the driving force behind Dahn. “Ilchi Lee makes the decisions,” Kim says. “Everything comes from him.” According to the lawsuit, Lee also rakes in money through a number of supposedly independent offshoots that retain ties to Dahn. A New Jersey-based company called CGI Inc., for example, owns a chain of Dahn Yoga studios, and a subsidiary of BR Consulting owns a corporate resort called Honor’s Haven that doubles as a Dahn retreat center. The general manager of Honor’s Haven is none other than Ilchi Lee’s youngest son, Chung Won “Julian” Lee, and the resort is run by

## “You have to go crazy about two things,” Lee told his disciples. “For your members. And you have to be crazy about money.”

Ilchi Lee’s wife, Journg Souk “Jane” Lee.

For her part, Mrs. Lee is settled into a \$2 million home in Alpine, New Jersey – America’s priciest ZIP code. “She wanted to be like royalty,” says Chun Hwa Ha, who worked for the Lee family for years before joining the lawsuit against Dahn in 2009. Lee, who lives in Arizona and sees his wife only a few times a year, allegedly takes full advantage of his freedom. Ha, who served as Lee’s live-in housekeeper, says she repeatedly witnessed Lee ushering disciples into his bedroom for private consultations; upon emerging, the women sometimes acted emotionally. In 2002, when Dahn settled a lawsuit brought by a California master who claimed that Lee had pressured her into sex, Dahn worked to spin the story to members. According to ex-master Marge Gargosh, Dahn superiors downplayed the accusations, saying that Lee’s actions were misunderstood. Gargosh recalls being told, “He was first-chakra training,” – that is, training her perineum.

In 2004, after lecturing on the MIT campus, Lee’s eye fell upon Jade Harrelson, then a 21-year-old student at the University of Massachusetts. A Dahn neophyte who had gotten involved less than a year earlier through her campus Body and Brain Club, Harrelson was flabbergasted when Lee singled her out after his lecture and invited her to come to Seoul. “I said to myself, ‘He must see some potential in

me,” she recalls. “It’s not just because I’m young and pretty and blond.” Harrelson eventually dropped out of school to take a job in Korea with BR English, a Dahn-oriented language program for children. Lee lavished her with gifts and renamed her Dahn Soon (“Simple”) Lee; whenever he was in town, Harrelson was expected to drop everything when he summoned her, whether it was to watch a World Cup match on TV or sit in a sauna holding hands. One night in October 2006, she was called to Lee’s top-floor apartment in a gated Seoul community, where his housekeeper instructed Harrelson to shower. Then Lee, clad in a tracksuit, invited her into his bedroom. She says he told her to lie down.

“I’d been trained so well to think of him as enlightened, and not to question him,” Harrelson says. “I thought, ‘Don’t be stupid, he would never do anything to harm you.’” According to Harrelson, Lee pushed down his pants and coerced her into having sex. When he finished, he caressed her locks. “I like gold hair,” he told her.

The next morning, Harrelson told her superiors what Lee had done to her and

that she was resigning from Dahn. Then she hid out in her apartment, crying, barely eating and cutting herself with razor blades. She says she was repeatedly visited by two senior Dahn masters, who yelled at her that she didn’t understand the spiritual dimension of Lee’s sexuality. “They told me I should apologize to him for questioning his integrity,” says Harrelson, who claims that Dahn offered her a six-figure sum to drop out of the lawsuit. “They said that this was an honor and I should be grateful.”

**I**N THE HOTEL BALLROOM AT HONOR’S Haven, Amy Shipley ran to her yoga mat, quaking with anticipation. All around her, some 65 soul-name recipients were anxiously awaiting Ilchi Lee’s arrival. The masters running the ceremony had set up a thronelike chair, filled vases with fresh flowers and straightened the mats in neat rows. In a few moments, Ilchi Lee would arrive to look at each one of them – his gaze reaching into their souls – and ascribe to each the Korean character that described what he saw. Receiving one’s soul name was an honor few masters had attained. Amy felt lucky to be here, grateful that her two years in Dahn had led her to this transcendent moment.

Ilchi Lee arrived with a swarm of assistants. Amy and the other masters leapt to their feet in applause, bowing in unison and shouting well-rehearsed greetings in

Korean. Lee, dressed in traditional loose-fitting Korean clothes, strode emperorlike into the room, his eyes sweeping the assembled followers, lingering on individual faces. Mounting his makeshift throne and gesturing for his disciples to sit, Lee surveyed the room in silence. Amy focused on her Grand Master’s face, smiled her HSP smile and radiated positivity, knowing that Ilchi Lee could read her thoughts.

Lee addressed the crowd in Korean, his voice low and calm. His female assistant translated into rapid-fire English: *None of you are sincere enough in your dedication to Dahn. All are unworthy of receiving your soul names.* The room erupted into sobs and thank-yous as Lee got up and left as abruptly as he had arrived.

Amy was devastated. “I knew he’d seen through all my layers,” she says. “He could see my desires, my ego, my insincerities, all my faults.” She immediately tried to dedicate herself anew to Dahn, but something inside her had collapsed. Ten days later Amy found herself getting into her blue Mazda 626 and driving home to Indiana.

Ricardo, meanwhile, was on his way back from Mexico, knowing he was in trouble. He’d been dispatched by his masters to ask his grandmother for \$45,000 for his training – told that if he couldn’t come up with the money, he would die, and his ailing grandparents might be damned for eternity. But during his three weeks in Mexico, Ricardo hadn’t been able to bring himself to ask for the cash: He was returning to Chicago empty-handed. He went straight to the Dahn center to report his failure. His master, a Korean woman who called herself Joy, met him at the door.

“Ricardo, Amy’s gone,” Joy told him. “She doesn’t love you.”

“What?” Ricardo was stunned.

“Ricardo, it’s time for you to take care of your spiritual growth. How much money can you put down?” Joy continued, informing him that he needed to fly to Sedona immediately to “focus on yourself.” “If you don’t buy that ticket today, don’t come back here again,” she warned him.

Ricardo went home in a state of shock. Amy had left him; his soul was dying; he had no idea what to do. For once, he asked his father for advice. “Don’t buy that ticket,” his father told him gently. “Don’t go back.” Ricardo spent the next two months holed up at his parents’ house, working in their garden and picking nectarines from their tree, just thinking. Without Dahn, he was depressed, confused and terribly adrift.

Former members say it can be nearly impossible to leave the group – not only because Dahn teaches that leaving means spiritual death, but because its members often harass those who try to quit. Kim Morse, a Boston member who left in 2006, says she received nearly 50 phone messages from her masters in two days, threatening that if she didn’t come back, she would get sick and die. A man active in the

ex-Dahn “underground railroad” says he has received death threats. Hun Kim, the high-ranking Dahn master who was one of Lee’s most trusted disciples before he broke with the sect last year, found himself questioned by police in Clarkstown, New York, after a Dahn affiliate alleged that he had embezzled company funds. (No charges were ever filed.) Kim’s defection is seen as particularly harmful to the group; Dahn reportedly held a recent ceremony in which members were told to draw pictures of Kim, then tore their pictures to shreds while shouting, “Die! Die! Die!”

For now, though, Lee seems to remain very much in control – and his empire remains extremely profitable. At Sedona, former members estimate, some 30 clients sign up each year for Dahn’s holiest course, which costs \$100,000; Mago Garden now boasts luxury suites with marble floors and Jacuzzis to accommodate such VIPs. During a two-hour-long lecture recorded with his New York masters last April, Lee reprimanded those who failed to achieve that month’s vision of money and members. “It sounds like you’re in kindergarten,” he scolded one disciple. “I’m surprised that there’s anybody that likes you.” While listening to progress reports from each master, some of whom burst into tears, Lee expressed his displeasure. “I want to hear the results,” he said. “I don’t want to hear the process!” He chastised the assembled masters for not selling enough copies of his newest book, *Brain Wave Vibration*, which he referred to as “holy scripture.” “You should start to feel nervous if you are apart from the *Brain Wave Vibration* book for even one minute,” he told them. “When you go to the bathroom, I want you to take that book with you!” Above all, he reminded them of the crucial nature of money: “We are an organization that needs a lot of money. Do you know why? In order to change the Earth’s environment and help the human environment, we need to have a successful business and make a lot of money. . . . You have to have the power to attract it to you like a magnet.”

Throughout the lecture, Lee never failed to remind followers of his own supremacy. After one young woman’s report went beyond the stipulated one-minute mark, Lee told her, “You’ve taken a lot of my very precious time, so you need to pay me a huge consulting fee.” She chuckled nervously as he continued, “Let me tell you that *one minute* of consulting from me is worth \$10,000. So right now you’re getting a very high-priced consulting.” He then instructed her to wash and massage the feet of her superior for the next 21 days. The woman thanked him profusely for his wisdom.

**F**OR WEEKS AFTER LEAVING DAHN, Amy scarcely left her childhood bedroom in Indiana. The pressure of having to face the innumerable decisions of a typical day – what to wear, what to eat,

what to do – were too overwhelming. “I hadn’t thought for myself in so long, I’d forgotten how,” she says. She couldn’t concentrate, had nightmares about her masters and Ilchi Lee, and was racked with anxiety – symptoms that would eventually be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. “I didn’t know who I was or what to do,” she recalls. Her family paid for therapy and intensive “deprogramming,” which helped Amy cope. Today, a year and a half after leaving Dahn, Amy is starting to get her act together, working as a teacher at a charter school in New Orleans.

Ricardo has not been faring quite as well. When he’s not working as a busboy, he spends most of his time hiding out. Unlike Amy, he hasn’t gotten any therapy since leaving Dahn. Although he was less indoctrinated into the cult than Amy, he has found himself struggling. “It’s something I haven’t gotten over,” he acknowledges. “Dahn flipped some switches in my head, and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to shut them off.” In January, Ricardo and Amy reached the painful decision, after seven years as a couple, to break up. “Amy and I came down to New Orleans to heal together, but we realized we’ve become a crutch for each other,” says Ricardo. “I just feel that Dahn has done so much damage to us that we have to separate in order to heal.”

Both are still grappling with how to make sense of their experience and the shame of how they could have let it happen to them. But what’s hardest to endure isn’t the misery they suffered in Dahn – it’s the memories of how the group awakened them to their own sense of potential. During their two years in Dahn, Amy and Ricardo proved themselves more hardy, capable and determined than either had ever imagined. For Ricardo, discovering that capacity was the sweetest satisfaction he has ever known – a contentment, he suspects, that most people will never know. He’s desperate to tap into that feeling again. If only he knew how.

“I feel like I’ve lost my sense of purpose,” he says. “There’s a part of me that wants to be challenged. But I feel like there are no jobs that challenge me, *nothing* to the point where I was challenged in Dahn.” Maybe that’s why, despite everything he now knows, and against all common sense, Ricardo secretly fears that what he really wants is to go back. **CS**

ROLLING STONE (ISSN 0035-791X) is published biweekly except for the first issue in July and at year’s end, when two issues are combined and published as double issues, by Wenner Media LLC, 1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104-0298. The entire contents of ROLLING STONE are copyright © 2010 by ROLLING STONE LLC, and may not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without written permission. All rights are reserved. Canadian Goods and Service Tax Registration No. R125041855. International Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 450553. The subscription price is \$39.96 for one year. The Canadian subscription price is \$52.00 for one year, including GST, payable in advance. Canadian Postmaster: Send address changes and returns to P.O. Box 63, Malton CFC, Mississauga, Ontario L4T 3B5. The foreign subscription price is \$80.00 for one year, payable in advance. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post publication agreement #40683192. Postmaster: Send address changes to ROLLING STONE Customer Service, P.O. Box 8243, Red Oak, IA 51591-1243.