



# The Wheel of Positivity

**How Hong Kong's major fitness influencers stay positive in the face of adversity. By Charmaine Ng**

New year, new beginnings. This month, we interview six fitness gurus in Hong Kong about their practice and how exercising turned their life around. Even during the worst of times, these inspiring individuals have managed to rise and transform, setting an example for all of us to follow. Their success through turmoil is an important message for our city at the moment.



## JAMES GANNABAN

*Yoga Instructor*

**Y**oga master James Gannaban has come a long way since 2015 – the year he almost died in a drug overdose. His inability to deal with a stressful Hong Kong life had finally come to a head and in that moment of desperation, his only choice was to seek change. He found yoga at a substance addiction rehab facility along the muddy banks of Chiang Mai's Ping River and it was there, inundated by subtropical humidity and giant mosquitoes, that he first experienced serenity. After almost a year of self-searching, James returned to Hong Kong and immersed himself in yoga, staying sober to this day.

### How did fitness turn your life around or help you be more positive?

I had always struggled with some type of addiction. I was a 200-pound teenage overeater. In my 20s, I struggled with alcohol and drugs. I realised through rehab and therapy that my addictions were filling a bottomless hole of insecurity, growing up 'different' as the first-born child. I later came to terms with being gay, of which I assumed a permissive and 'alternative' lifestyle were de rigueur. I wanted so badly to belong.

Through yoga, I learned to slowly accept myself. I learned I didn't need to conform or please other people. I learned to get out of my own head. I learned all about balance. Life can be frenetic; the body gets tired. As much as we put ourselves through on a daily basis, we need to be mindful to take the opposite actions of rest and recover.

### How do you maintain inner calm when the external world gets chaotic?

Often, my perception of the outside world is a reflection of my internal state. I take a breath. Taking a breath is my magic "pause" button. It's the easiest thing I can do to make myself feel better. I literally take a moment to reflect and accept the things I can't change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.



### What advice do you have for someone going through a difficult time?

Ask for help. You don't need to go through this alone. You're deserving of help. You're worthy.

## UTAH LEE

*Nike Master Trainer*



**F**itness instructor and model Utah Lee is Hong Kong's first Nike Master Trainer, known for her signature blonde ponytail and positive attitude towards fitness. Her foray into fitness began more than two decades ago in a chance encounter with an entrepreneur who was setting up a gym in Hong Kong. Utah decided to help out, starting with odd jobs in customer service, sales, fitness programming and even cleaning, but eventually moved on to teach dance classes. She

went on to extend her knowledge by taking numerous fitness training courses has since been teaching to a variety of clients in Hong Kong.

### How did fitness turn your life around or help you be more positive?

I have always been an introvert, but since I had to work with people in the service industry, I learned how to 'fake it until I make it'. Now I love to entertain people and I actually enjoy connecting with strangers and of course the people that I train.

### How do you maintain inner calm when the external world gets chaotic?

For my work, I often face and interact with a wide range of people and always expect the unexpected. People fighting in class, dealing with sports injuries, embarrassing moments... I usually handle situations like these seriously with a chill attitude. My solution is to stay calm, think clearly and deal with it somewhere else.

### What's your personal definition of healthy?

Exercise regularly, eat relatively healthy, get enough rest and be kind – that leads to a positive and happy mindset!

## VICTOR CHAU

*Co-director of IRIS: Your Escape*

**A**s a teenager, Victor Chau suffered from a heart disease called ventricular tachycardia, which involves abnormally fast palpitations of the heart of up to 160 to 180 beats per minute for no reason. He was ordered not to do any strenuous exercise and not to drink coffee by the doctor until after his two heart surgeries. When the whole ordeal was over and done with, Victor joined a gym for the first time in his 20s, started doing some light exercise, moving on to a spin class and finally yoga classes. He recalls how unfit he was when his fitness journey began – in fact, he hated yoga when he first started – but he kept trying and eventually got hooked. Today, he exercises regularly, practices yoga everyday and takes his yoga mat wherever he travels.

#### How did fitness turn your life around or help you be more positive?

Fitness and health is not about being not sick. It can be seen as a bank where you can never have enough health in your life. If someone like me who had a heart condition for 10 years and two surgeries can now run four to five kilometres, do yoga and teach yoga to hundreds of people, do a handstand for two minutes and do a split, anything is possible. But you need to trust the process and put in the hard work. Not only have

yoga and fitness changed the way my body looks and feels, it also gives me an internal purpose to improve and get better.

#### How do you maintain inner calm when the external world gets chaotic?

There are two reminders for me when things get a little rough in life:

**1. Nothing is permanent.** Good times, bad times, people we hate, people we love – they shall all pass. There is always light at the end of the tunnel. You just need to work hard to get through it.

**2. Be grateful.** It is a miracle that we can do what we can today as a human species. Be grateful to people you love, events in your life, big or small. This will give you a whole new level of perspective in life.

#### What advice do you have for someone going through a difficult time?

Glass half full, half empty? It's entirely your choice. As mentioned, everything shall pass -



nothing is here forever. When you're down, the human mind can only see what's right in front of it. Difficult or happy times – they come and go. And remember, you are the only person who's responsible for your health and happiness, stop blaming other people or the circumstances and take ownership of your life.

## MALBERT LEE

*Sound Meditation Yogi*

**M**albert Lee had been practising yoga since he was a teenager but it wasn't until 2016, during yoga teacher training, did he discover sound meditation. His favourite teacher would play a singing bowl and gong sound track at the end of each class, which always managed to soothe him. Shortly after, Malbert decided to get his first crystal singing bowl. He still remembers the first time he chimed the bowl – his whole body instantly filled with warmth, joy and a sense of ease.

It shaped his passion and mission to use sound to destress and elevate the world. Since then, his collection of sound instruments has grown and thousands of people have benefitted from his sound experience internationally.

#### How did fitness turn your life around or help you be more positive?

Sound vibration from instruments such as the tuning fork, singing bowls and gong is highly efficient and effective in creating space within our body, promoting circulation and improving sleep quality. When everything flows in harmony in my mind-body, my well-being improves.

#### How do you maintain inner calm when the external world gets chaotic?

Working with high-frequency sound vibration elevates my energy and puts me on a higher state of mind. I'm more aware of the surrounding environment and have the ability to respond to everything calmly instead of reacting with my emotions.

#### If you could contribute to the Hong Kong society right now in one way, what would you do?

Keep doing what I'm doing right now – use sound vibration to elevate and improve people's well-being.



## HEMA MIRPURI

Founder of The Yoga Room



**H**ema Mirpuri's yoga journey began 20 years ago. Drawn in by the physical aspect of the practice, she found her place with hot yoga as it provided her with a challenge. Over the years, her attitude towards yoga began shifting organically – now, Hema focuses more on inner awareness and breathwork rather than simply the physical look of a pose. She sees yoga as a continuing education and is constantly evolving to become a better teacher. Her passion for the practice eventually led her to open her own boutique yoga studio, The Yoga Room, in 2008. The studio offers small focused classes and personalised instructions, led by Hema herself and a team of professional yogis, in the heart of Sheung Wan.

**How do you maintain inner calm when the external world gets chaotic?**

I accept that nothing is permanent in life and that

there will always be changes. It is important to stay positive, have faith and know that things will eventually settle and find a balance.

**How did fitness turn your life around to help you be more positive?**

By doing yoga I find an inner calm within myself whether I am teaching or practising. Coming out of the yoga room, I feel more grounded and ready to deal with what life has in store for me with a more positive outlook.

**What's something not many people know about you?**

Aside from teaching adults, I also teach kids. I started my teaching journey as a kids yoga teacher and have been doing this for more than 16 years. I teach kids of all ages and I think they can be your biggest teacher as they have no issue giving you honest feedback. Teaching them can be a challenge but seeing them grow their practice is so rewarding.

## MELANIE COX

Programme Director of IRIS: Your Escape

**M**elanie Cox grew up playing all types of sports as a kid. She would go swimming and play tennis with her dad before school. After school, she got into field hockey and football, and in her free time, she would rollerblade, skateboard and even go horse riding. As a teenager, she played for three hockey teams and at one point also three football teams – seven days a week she was on the move. Melanie's excessive exercise habits eventually led to re-occurring injuries, forcing her to take a year off from sports and running. This seemed like the end of the world to teenaged Melanie but it was a blessing in disguise as it guided her to a spiritual movement journey in yoga, meditation and trekking.

**How did fitness turn your life around or help you be more positive?**

One of the hardest things to hear as a teen was my physiotherapist telling me that if I didn't take a break from running I wouldn't be walking properly by the time I turned 40. It was tough mentally and physically, but the universe works in funny ways. My grandpa had begun to teach me some simple pranayama and chakra meditations. Simultaneously, my parents suggested I try yoga since they had given it a go for a year. Five years later, I still work daily on getting in tune with my body and maintaining well-being on physical, mental, spiritual and energetic levels.

**How do you maintain inner calm when the external world gets chaotic?**

Meditation is key, particularly in a city like Hong Kong and with my lifestyle managing several projects at once. It is fundamental to give myself the time to set my day right. By setting intentions, by slowing down my breath to ground me and ultimately to align my inner and outer world so I am present to see the day for what it is and what comes at me. Giving time for myself to meditate is the best gift anyone can give themselves – and it's free!

**What advice do you have for someone going through a difficult time?**

Be grateful. It may not feel like it, but tough times mean an opportunity for shift and growth. It is human nature to get settled and comfortable, but



the universe shaking things up and occasionally taking the ground beneath your feet is a blessing in disguise. Be present and mindful of where your lesson is and what growth you can take on.

**Your turn!** Pull on your gym gear and kickstart 2020 at our **Hong Kong Living New Year Urban Retreat** on January 19. There will be classes and workshops led by prominent figures in the yoga, fitness, meditation and nutrition industries – and who knows, you may meet some of these fitness influencers yourself! Tickets are **\$180** (early bird **\$99** until January 3). The Hong Kong Observation Wheel, 33 Man Kwong Street, Central. [hongkongliving.com/shop](http://hongkongliving.com/shop)