



Journey

By
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Travel and the Spiritual Journey are parallel concepts. I ask, “where are we journeying to?” and “where are we traveling from?” The answers reveal our self, the state of our being, our needs, and our desires. What are we tethered to so tightly that we have to run far from it for a perceived feeling of freedom? From what place in our lives do we wish to depart to arrive at another place?

Why do we feel the need to physically travel to an often times unknown destination in order to embark upon a spiritual journey?

This is an apparent reality revealed by the hoards of westerners who flock to the east, to “spiritual destinations”, for help. Help. I was living in India in 2006, I had been there 9 months when a good friend from California emailed me she would be in India leading a tour of yoga students. She is a powerful teacher immersed in the depths of yoga. Her dedication to her path inspires me. I was excited to meet up with her and her group. I spent two weeks in Rishikesh and Haridwar in Northern India at an ashram with these wide eyed, open hearted, somewhat culturally traumatized yoga students.

We stayed in simple rooms within a large compound with a garden, library, small temple, shrines to the myriad Hindu gods, a small store, dining and meeting areas and a school and orphanage way at the back at the foot of the hill. Our classes were held in the school building. The dining room was full of travelers from all over the world unable to keep the silence requested while we eat. Silence. We all chatted away about where we were from, why we were there, what we thought of the food—tourists of the spiritual experience. Those who had been there awhile shared their critique of the different *babas* and *gurus* at the various ashrams, the yoga classes and where to find decent food.

The baba at our ashram held a *darshan* where followers could sit in his presence, listen to his words, and meditate together. The room was crushed with westerners, some feeling they had certain right to be closer to him than others. One of his devotees spoke for a while and led a meditation. My experience of meditation in his presence was the flash of a huge professional bulb attached to a camera clicking away every few seconds to document all of us meditating. The baba spoke briefly and then we all shuffled out to find

some of our shoes stolen.

The only Indians present either worked there or were visiting the Hindu temples and shrines in the ashram. Many ashrams seem to no longer have “Indian prices” but prices that only westerners can afford. At this ashram they now have an American woman handling their finances.

The spiritual journey can be commodified, which doesn't mean there isn't meaning and truth within the package. But it presupposes that the journey can be dictated from without, rather than from within as an inner guidance, a personal path, unique to each person. We seek a map when we are too lost find our own way. The map we choose resonates with what is within us already. When falling we cling to the map. When do we let go?

Once a week the cows would be allowed in to graze the grass and shrubs. The bulls, overcome with excitement, would charge up and down the lawn, swinging their horns around, rolling in the lush green, dew dripping nectar, high off their drug. High. Their usual meal consists of what they root out of the garbage piles on the side of the road before they are burned.

We shuffled from our rooms in the early morning, yoga mats under our arms, left the walled compound, crossed the back alley, and walked up the wide path leading to the orphanage. An orange-robed child swept the stairs at the end of the path leading to his home every morning in silence. One morning a family of monkeys played outside the windows as we played in yoga asanas inside. We watched each other curiously.

We were in our own group studying with our American yoga teacher and with Mataji, an incredible Indian woman renunciate. In her fifties, once her children were grown and had their own children, she decided to devote herself to the spiritual path. She taught us Sanskrit chanting and yoga philosophy. It was a beautiful experience I still carry with me.

I return to those chants when I feel lost. I don't need to return to India. The practice is the journey. Whatever your practice is. Spiritual work is internal work not external. “We” don't go anywhere when we travel. “We” remain, the same as before, and the same afterwards.

Outward change, such as location, could provide a blueprint for internal change or a space to concentrate more fully. Being out of one's own comfort zone forces an evaluation of the self in reaction to new stimuli. These reactions are indicators of the steadiness of one's path. Is compassion retained when pushed to the brink? Does honesty remain when fear and uncertainty creep in? Does generosity remain when resources are exhausted? When lost, is God still there? Are perceived internal changes constant when one returns from the journey to the same point of embarkation?

I end with questions, as I began. Our minds incessantly question for answers that don't absolutely exist. Life isn't a question or an answer, it just is. Letting go of the mind, letting go of our sense of place in the outside world is the journey. Letting go.

*“But there is a way of treating the mind. There is a way of generating peace and relief, lightness and freedom. **The way is to make the mind interact with the Soul, the Subject or the Self.** As the interactions with the plural world give rise to afflictions and tension, so will the contemplation on the one and uniform Soul generate peace, poise, freedom.”*
Swami Bhoomananda