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TOPIC OF THE MONTH

May 2011

NEPAL and INDIA

I went on an exploration trip of North India and Nepal. India can be so bizarre, yet fun and frustrating at the same time. I won't miss the beggars or having to negotiate for EVERY little thing, not having hot water at the shower, and having the electric and internet work

sporadically--I guess I will have a better appreciation for those things when I get home. I will miss the random craziness of the place, some of the people (especially the Nepali people), and their devotion to their way of life. I will be assimilating many nuggets from this experience into my life and psyche for a long time.



I went on this trip looking for the spiritual side of yoga . . . and what I discovered is the most spiritual experiences I have had have been right here at home on my mat (and in Maui too). Actually some of my India experiences left me with a spiritual "void" feeling!

For example we stop to visit a temple, and people inside smear red on your forehead (you did not ask for it) and demand payment for it! Other people try to put you through some ceremony you don't even know what is going on--and again demand money. They demand money for where you leave your shoes, for even just looking at a shrine.

And over 99% of the Babas or Sadhus, don't meditate or teach yoga or give lectures . . . they basically sit around all day and smoke pot, and beg for money which they don't need as they are fed and housed for free from the ashrams. And sadly

even that has been corrupted by businesses who make fake write offs by donating to the ashrams (to feed the babas)--the ashrams give them a receipt for a fictitious amount of money--80% more than they actually donated for tax write off purposes . . .

I could sense at one time India was spiritually alive --- and is the energetic birthplace of much of the inspiration we experience in the west today. I have much gratitude and reverence for what was birthed and developed in India, but maybe I don't need to look there for continuing guidance?

So I decided we make our own spirituality, its not necessarily found in a church or a holy city.





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The areas I chose to go to in India are the holiest cities. From Varanasi to Haridwar (or should it have been from Haridwar to Varanasi?). Haridwar means gate to god (hari = god, dwar = gate) the main bathing area in Haridwar along the Ganga is called Har-ki-Pauri, in this area is believed to be a footprint of Vishnu in a stone. (And I loved getting in the Ganga here too and hanging out in the market place--this was the market place that people were more honest with their pricing and not just trying to rip off the tourists). The hindus believe this is the best city to be born in as it is the gateway to god making it easier to live close to god. The best place to die is Varanasi (and I would have to agree--much better to die in Varanasi than to live there!) Dying in Varanasi the hindus believe

= liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, so you go to the causal plane or "heaven" if you die in Varanasi. And I did enjoy my time in Varanasi and had quite an experience at the burning ghats

seeing the cremations--from bodies being dipped into the Ganga to lighting the pyres from the fire that has been burning since the beginning of time, and having the bones thrown into the river right beside me where I had to jump to miss the splash! Floating upon the Ganga by the cremations made me feel like I was part of the ceremony--part of the celebration of death. No one was sad here, they were happy and cheering as they paraded around the body of their beloved dead one. I did wonder, as i sat there

feeling the heat from the many fires burning and breathing in the air . . . how many people's molecules I was breathing in as their bodies burnt . . . ashes to ashes . . . However Varanasi

is very dirty--and the Ganga there is very dirty--has trash floating in it!, there is much poverty, and so many people tried to rip us off or scam us there. We did get very lucky and meet an angel rickshaw driver named Shree Rambali who spent two days with us taking us around the city. He is our angel in Varanasi. I miss him :(



I did enjoy the devotion of the Indian people to their gods and shrines. I loved seeing the colorful pictures of deities and OM's and Swastikas all over (too bad the Nazis ruined the swastika, it is all over India--it actually came from India. The word swastika came from the Sanskrit word svastika,





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meaning any lucky or auspicious object, and in particular a mark made on persons and things to denote good luck. It is composed of su- meaning "good, well" and asti "to be" svasti thus means "well-being." The suffix -ka intensifies the verbal meaning, and svastika might thus be translated literally as "that which is associated with well-being," corresponding to "lucky charm" or "thing that is auspicious). The trucks are decorated, signs, billboards, peoples cars, rickshaws, tuk-tuks, even their ads have a spiritual undertone to them. Everywhere you look you see colorful deities--i love that, its like everywhere you look you see God. And maybe that is what is spiritual in India.





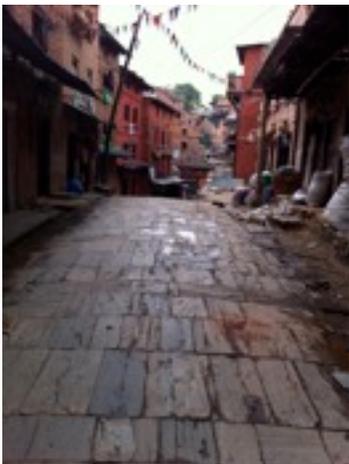
Nepali Trekking

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My favorite part of the trip was trekking in Nepal. And that is where I felt the most spirituality; connecting with the Nepali people and their simple lifestyles. Although there were no signs of physical yoga anywhere . . . I think with all the manual labor they have in their life they don't need asana! And there are buddhist temples (and hindu shrines) all over but the temples are all deserted and shrines seemed rarely or only quickly used --we would notice people walking by and doing a quick cross motion over their heart and head, etc. However the Nepali people and attitudes are greatly influenced by the buddhist culture, they have a very gentle, loving way about them.



And the Tibetan Prayer flags blowing in the breezes all over Northern Nepal. I especially enjoyed the prayer flags--something about seeing the flap in the breezes was spiritually uplifting. They are little flags with Sanskrit scriptures, prayers, sutras, and symbolic animals on them. It is believed the wind will blow the prayers on to your house or into the air.



It will take me some time to integrate the experience of the trek. It was very tough--we hiked 6 hours per day for 5 days straight--very steeply up or very steeply down--nothing in between! Every single muscle, tendon, and ligament below my waist was sore . . .

But what a wonderment! Even though we were in the wilderness we were not. There is a path, that weaves all the way through the Himalayas, some parts are laid with stone steps, some parts are mud, and in some areas they are starting to build a road. The path weaves through many little villages, we did not go longer than an hour in between villages. And along the paths you pass many locals carrying very strange and heavy things from one town to the next. And the way they carry things . . . they put a strap around the object, then place the

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strap around their head like a head band and the object lays on their back. It is amazing how much weight they carry like that--makes me wonder if the 7 headstands prepare you for that . . .

There are no cars or motorized vehicles of any kind (yet), they use donkeys and people (porters) to transport needs up into the Himalayas and from town to town.



We did get

to witness a machine (mecine as the sign spelled it) digging out for a road . . .which will bring change . . . and enjoyed watching all the villagers standing around watching the big machine that will change their lives.



We lived like they live, no running water, no internet or cell (although surprisingly many of the Nepali people had old style cell phones), most places had a little old fashioned electric--just

enough for a few light bulbs and to charge their cell phones (but

the electric was more steady than the electric in the cities of nepal as the villages are along rivers and they set up very simple hydro plants to feed electric to the villages, these hydro plants seem to work very well).

They cook over fire (we saw many people hauling fire wood on their backs) and use water from the river. They have very unique ways of running hoses from streams that feed the river or from the river to areas in their village. The houses do not have running water, instead the moms and teenage daughters gather around the community water supply from the river and fill up the copper and stainless steel pots to take water to their homes. It was funny we asked where the sink was in one place and



they handed us a bowl . . .





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On the trek most of the places you stay are right in the homes of the villages (those were my favorite places), they cook for you while grandma takes care of baby, and big sister helps mom cook and do dishes and wait on us tourists. It was so much fun mingling with the families and playing with the kids. In the process I gave away two anklets and a bracelet . . . I was surprised even though there are no schools the kids are pretty well educated and most speak enough english to communicate pretty well.



I especially enjoyed the simple life on the trek, using the water from the river to wash clothes and dishes, many

times river side, and night owl me was asleep every night by 9:00pm! You don't



realize how much we take for granted in our lifestyle, they grew their own wheat and millet, sun dry it on their porches and grind it to make their own bread . . .

And being a mom, it was nice to see how the kids play--there are no computers (one place i had to charge my computer and had to bring it into the dining room to find an outlet, everyone was amazed at my computer and we had fun playing on it taking pictures with photo booth, and they enjoyed typing their names in English on it.

The little boys run around and play with sling shots, Steve and I were using our cell phones as cameras; we

were walking up to a little village and one of the boys playing with is sling shot sees Steve's blackberry and says "ooh a blackberry!" and Steve looks at him and says "ooh a slingshot!" And asks if he can play with it--it was so interesting to see how this changed the little boys perception about his toy :)

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And we noticed a similar reaction in me adopting their home made "back packs". They have these unique cloths they fold and tie up a



special way and use as a back pack--i love simple things like this and found myself coveting one . . . so I asked in one of the villages if I could buy one--this shocked them greatly but they sold me one and showed me how to wrap it and wear it. The remarks I got from so many people seeing me wear their local "Nepali Bungra bag"!, asking me which town I bought it in and how much I paid for it, etc. Apparently they loom them themselves from their own special materials and everyone had comments about how theirs is a special high quality material that will last longer :)



We were also very very fortunate to have a full moon the night of our peak, we hiked up to approx. 10,000' (the trek goes up to 17,000' but it was cold enough at 10,000'!). See the snow covered peaks in the distance as we hiked



through the Himalayas was breathtaking and very spiritual. Interestingly Mt. Everest is actually one of the lowest



mountains in the Himalayas--it just happens to be the only one people have managed to climb. The highest is the Anapurna mountain peak and there are many stories of people dying while trying to climb it.



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I would like to add, if you decide to trek the Himalayas please honor their traditions and ways of living. We noticed along the trek in talking with people that they think our way of living in America is superior to theirs, and they try to offer us some of those luxuries, for example they haul bottles of soda up the mountains! We were horrified to see many trekkers ordering these sodas--a donkey or porter had to carry the cases up the mountain and then the empty



bottles have to be carried back down . . . we instead chose to drink their ginger mint tea--from the ginger and mint grown in their gardens. The Nepali people are wonderful farmers and seeing their beautiful farms and how fresh and nutritious their food is makes me wonder why anyone would come to the himalayas and order macaroni and cheese and a soda . . .



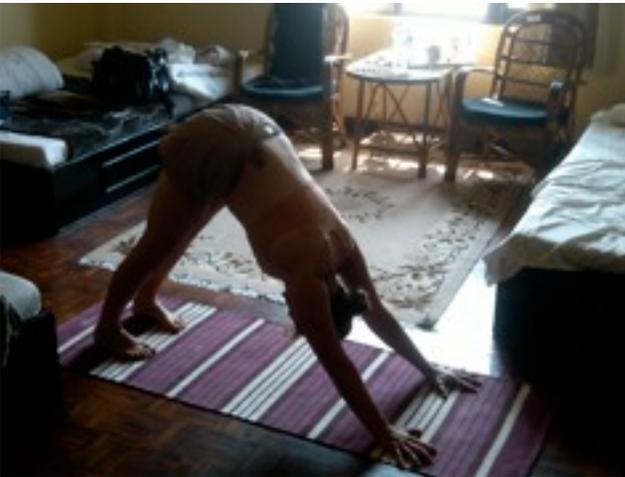
I would like to say, I was surprised how many areas of the trek reminded me of our wonderful woods here in Pennsylvania :) except the rivers were much cleaner and the peaks much higher . . . And the animals a bit more communicative.





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And as for practice . . . Many people asked me how I did practice on the trip; most of the trip we had hotel rooms or balconies that were big enough to accommodate yoga mats :) We mostly did half practices though (we did about 4 or 5 full practices on the entire trip). The lifestyles



in general require you to be flexible! We have to remember that yoga is union and many times that union is with other people, our children, a new experience, or nature. Spending too much time on my mat while on this trip would have been disconnecting me from this life experience. Our practice is to enhance our



lives--not limit it. While trekking we did not have the space, time, or energy for practice but we stretched all along the way. Each place we stopped I would do a couple standing poses and stretch out my hips and hamstrings, then each night I would do a 15-30 minute stretch on my bed. I was pleasantly surprised how this maintained my strength and flexibility when I got home and returned to my normal practice schedule. This is another example of how consistency and stick-to-it-ive-ness in your practice pays off.



Temples and ashrams

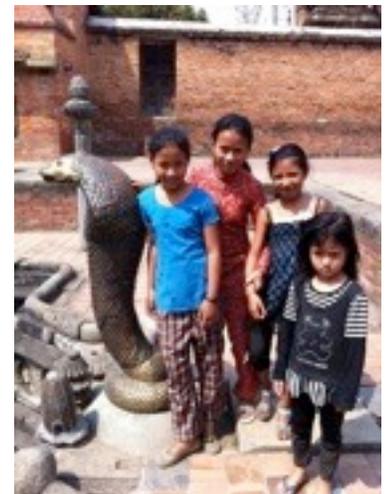
We did visit some buddhist temples in Nepal, and although I could see at one time the temples were vibrant with inspirational energy, I was surprised to see them deserted, crumbling. I kept noticing the energy I felt around them was suppression. I think that is why they are no longer being used. our society takes a religion or a philosophy or an idea and forces it upon ourselves. As if we are less than and we need to do hours and hours of mediation, yoga, penance to be more than. In this process we suppress a lot of our feelings and emotions, a lot of ourselves. And it is just not effective. Hence all the dead temples.



Actually the temples have become playgrounds for the kids there--a sweet use for the temples. Also many of the statues have become clothelines . . . The only actively used temple I saw in Nepal was the Kali temples--the sacrificing of animals. We went to a Kali temple just after three huge fat goats were beheaded . . . Seems like a cruel ritual to maintain but I have to share this is how the Nepali people also feed their homeless. And in Nepal even though there was poverty there too,

no one seemed like they were starving.

Although the temples in India were very active--but (see above) the spirituality there was void. Except for my favorite temple in India --the Shiva Temple





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The Shiva temple was active but no one was at you for money.

It is a big church like temple with many rooms and texts imprinted in marble and hanging on the walls. Texts from all the hindu scriptures like the Upanishads, Mahabharata (Including the Bhagavad Gita), and many other ancient scriptures--including the Sutras (Patanjali). There were also some altars and statues that the hindu people would prostrate before.



From the walls of the Shiva Temple (in Varanasi):

the Soul is the life of the body which without it would be a carcass, so is the Supreme Spirit the essence of the Individual Soul's being.

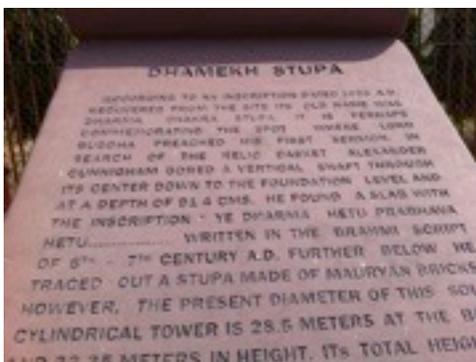
And yet even as the Soul is lost in the body the Supreme Spirit functioning as the Soul of the Individual Soul, loses cognizance of its own real Divine nature.

Ishavashyopanishad 1

Baghavat Gita 6:5 -- One must deliver himself with the help of his mind, and not degrade himself. The mind is the friend of the atman and his enemy as well.

or

One should lift oneself (atman) up by means of the self (atman). Do not degrade the self, for the self is one's only friend, and at the same time the self is ones only foe.



We did also visit the Dhamekh Stupa--the place where Buddha gave his first sermon. I did like this area as well--even though it is in Varanasi, there was a nice energy there. Although I thought it a bit ironic they built a huge memorial there that looks like a big lingam . . . then the drilled through the center of it hoping to find the Budhhas remains . . .



Ashrams

We visited some ashrams while we were in Rishikesh. Rishikesh has a



completely different feel to in the other parts of India we were in. Rishikesh has a big new agey/hippie vibe. And lots of monkeys :) So while it was a cool place to hang out for a bit, I was not drawn to it. I think i was getting my fill of ashrams and temples . . . We visited several ashrams, Swami Rama's ashram, a really big ashram there called Omkarananda, the Beatles ashram (which is deserted), Ram Dass's guru, Neem Karoli Baba's ashram.



I don't have hardly any pictures of the ashrams as they do not allow you to take pictures; which I thought was due to some sacred reason, but as it turns out it is because they don't want anyone to copy their unique temples . . . which they are beautiful. But that attitude seems less than spiritual . . . Each of the ashrams has very colorful and unique temples which houses their deities and



shrines. And although at a previous time on my path I could have been sucked into ashram life, it did not appeal to me now. I think there may be benefit at some point--like if we need to reset something in ourselves, break a cycle or a habit. Otherwise it seems a lot like withdrawal from life. What I felt in the ashrams was suffocation! We had lunch at Swami Rama's ashram they observe silence at all meals. And although this can meditative it is not connective. Yoga is about connecting--being in the vibrant flow of life, ashrams seems to be about the opposite of that--withdrawal from life, maybe to some inner pleasure or happiness. I think our way through this is to have the inner happiness in the midst of sharing and connecting with other beings.



and be



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I am sorry to say that I also felt a lot of fake energy around the ashrams. People just trying to be too spiritual--not realistic. I think that was my biggest turn off. Also Rishikesh is where we saw the most westerners.

My favorite ashram was the Beatles ashram, it sets back a little way from Ganga but has a beautiful view of it. It has little huts scattered around instead of a big concrete building. And it had a nice energy about it. Although we did not tour it as some guy was trying to make you pay to see it and give us his "tour" which I was just not into. I would have enjoyed just walking the grounds on our own.



I also enjoyed visiting Neem Karoli Baba's (Ram Dass's guru) ashram. Even though I could not really feel much of his presence there I enjoyed seeing his photos, the humungous Hanuman statue, and imagining where he did his teachings to Ram Dass. In all the reading and research I have done on true gurus, he thus far is the only person I consider a real "guru". He was an incarnation of Hanuman.

Below is the "motto" of the Omkarananda ashram:

The Ashram aims to create a sanctum where spirituality encompasses every action, where truth attains a personality, divine love becomes an all-pervading reality and peace becomes an eternal constant companion.

Oh I was happy to see that Ashtanga Yoga (and Iyengar) is practiced in Rishikesh.

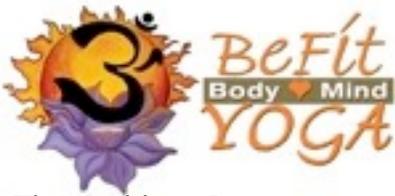




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My fav part of rishikesh is where the ganga comes out of the himalayas :)





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The Goddess Ganga



The Indians are very Spiritual about their "Ganga" (everyone in India refers the river as the Ganga --both gs pronounced with the hard g sound). Even taxi cab drivers would remark as we crossed over or passed



by the Ganga, "The Ganga". The Ganga is glacier water, it flows from a cave in the Himalayas originating at about 13,000'. It merges with other rivers that form the Ganga as it flows through India. The Ganga is an important resource to India--a population of approx. 407 million use water from the Ganga for several uses ranging from drinking and bathing, to agriculture, industry, and other household uses.

Water from the Ganges is used to cleanse any person, place, or object for ritual purposes. Bathing in the river is believed to wash away one's "sins". To bathe in the Ganga is a lifelong ambition for Hindus and they congregate in incredible numbers for the Sangam, Sagar Mela and



Kumbh Mela festivals. It is believed that any water that mixes with even the smallest amount of Ganges water becomes holy with healing powers. Most every



Hindu has a copper pot in their house with Ganga water in it (so do all the teachers here now ;) as I brought them each back some Ganga water from Haridwar), they use the water for healing purposes--or if someone is dying they put the water in their mouth. If you can not

make it to Varanasi to die the Hindus believe that taking in Ganga

water with your last breath will also assure you moksha (liberation) at death.

Ganga water truly does have some medicinal properties, it does not spoil even after many years of being bottled, but this has a scientific explanation to it: a bacteria called "BACTERIOPHAGE" is found the water which kills other harmful bacteria invading the water.

We did witness many people coming to the Ganga to bathe. The cities along the Ganga have what they call ghats--stairs that lead down to the Ganga so you can bathe and wash your





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clothes in it. And in seeing this process it was quite colorful and beautiful to see all the women swimming in their saris!

No woman seemed to have swimsuits, they all just get in the water in their saris. Men strip down to their underwear to get in. When in



Rome . . . so I swam in the Ganga with my clothes on (once by accident . . .) and Steve stripped down to his underwear to swim--it was kind of funny seeing him walk around in public in his underwear . . .



I did very much enjoy swimming in the Ganga (in Haridwar and Rishikesh where it is clean (I did not get in the water in Varanasi where the Ganga is very polluted). The water is very cold and swift--they have railings around the ghats, I understood why when I got in the water--I was swept away against the railing before I even realized what was happening--and I am a strong swimmer. While I was in Rishikesh I did drink the Ganga water--and even filled up my water bottle



with it. It has a very fresh taste to it, we were right at the apex where the Ganga comes out of the Himalayas (close to the China border) so the water is very clean there. Swimming in the Ganga felt exhilarating--I love natural bodies of water--the Pisces in me loves the water ;) but also swimming in the Madi Kholi river in the Himalayas in Nepal was just as exhilarating. So while the Ganga is a great Goddess I believe many other bodies of water are too.



And it is a bit of a shame that in India's holiest city that their holy river flows through is where the river is most polluted. By the time the Ganga water reaches Varanasi it is



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polluted from Industry and sewage . . . and dead bodies. Although the Indians say the dead bodies add minerals back to the water and won't pollute the water. I did not witness any dead bodies floating in the water but a friend of mine who visited Varanasi about a year before I did saw a body floating in the water. In Varanasi there are approx. 40,000 cremations



each year performed on wood pyres where the bodies are not fully consumed and are thrown in the river, along with many bodies from people who can not afford the cremation. Soot covered men bustle about raking up the burning ashes and throwing them into



the river. Grey dust from the pyres mix with flower garlands, foam, trash, plastic bags, dirty clothes, and little statue deities that are sacrificed to the river mix to create a dirty river. The government is taking action to try to clean up the Ganga, supposedly by 2020 the Ganga will be clean again.



Even though I don't subscribe to any one particular religion and I am not Hindu, I have wanted to experience the Ganga for quite a few years, so I feel especially blessed to have had the opportunity to play in the Ganga in several of the cities it caresses.

And my lesson with this awesome trip is that I did not need to go to India to find the devotional side of yoga, it is right here in my own heart.