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CATEGORIES OF INDIAN THOUGHT

THE CITY OF LIGHT
HEATHER ELTON

ASHTANGA YOGA CONFLUENCE
DEBORAH IFILL HILAND & JENNY BOUWER



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Photographs by the author.

*Cover: Brahmins on the ghats in Varanasi.
Photograph by Heather Elton.*



SRI K. PATTABHI JOIS



SRI SWAMI VISHNU-DEVANANDA

NĀMARŪPA uses diacritical marks, as per the chart shown to the right, for the transliteration of all Saṃskṛta words. While many of the articles do contain these marks, it is not a universal occurrence in the magazine. In those cases where authors have elected not to use diacritics, Saṃskṛta words remain in their simple, romanized form. Chart by Vyaas Houston.

अ a	आ ā	इ i ए e	ई ī ऐ ai ऋ ṛ	उ u ओ o अं am	ऊ ū औ au अः aḥ
क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa	
च ca	छ cha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ ña	
ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa	
त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na	
प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma	
य ya	र ra	ल la	व va		
श śa	ष ṣa	स sa	ह ha		
क्ष kṣa	त्र tra	ज्ञ jña			

ASHTANGA YOGA CONFLUENCE

DEBORAH IFILL HILAND

ॐ

वन्दे गुरुणां चरणारविन्दे सन्दर्शितस्वात्मसुखावबोधे ।
निःश्रेयसे जङ्गलिकायमाने संसारहालाहलमोहशान्त्यै ॥
आबाहुपुरुषकारं शङ्खचक्रासिधाणिम् ।
सहस्रशिरशं श्वेतं प्रणमामि पतञ्जलिम् ॥

Om

vande gurūṇāṃ caṇāṇāravinde sandarśita-svātma-sukhāvabodhe |
niḥśreyase jāṅgalikāyamāne saṁsāra-hālāhala-mohaśāntyai ||
ābāhu-puruṣākāraṁ śaṅkha-cakrāsi-dhāṇiṁ |
sahasra-śirasam śvetam pranamāmi patañjalim ||

I bow to the two lotus feet of the gurus, who have awakened the knowledge of my own true happiness,
my ultimate refuge, acting like the jungle physician, for the pacifying of the delusion of the the poison of samsara.
Who has assumed the form of a human up to the arms, bearing a conch, a discus, and a sword,
with thousands of radiant, white heads, I bow to Patanjali.



Nancy Gilgoff, Richard Freeman, David Swenson, Tim Miller and Eddie Stern. Photograph by Michelle Haymoz.

If we practice the science of yoga—which is useful to the entire human community and which yields happiness both here and hereafter—if we practice it without fail, we will then attain physical, mental, and spiritual happiness, and our minds will flood towards the Self.

The means by which the mind is directed towards the Self and prevented from going towards outside objects is what is known as yoga.... The word yoga signifies the means to the realization of one's true nature

just as the evening sun cools his [own] radiance, so will one who practices the third step of ashtanga yoga — āsana — be free from mental disturbance and so become stable-minded

*Tritiya kalasto' ravih svayam
samharate prabham, tritiyangasthito
yogi vikaram manasam tatha.*

Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, *Yoga Mala*

THE FIRST ANNUAL ASHTANGA YOGA Confluence¹ featured five senior western students of Sri K Pattabhi Jois for a gathering in the spirit of Gururji's life and teachings. This historical event brought together people from around the world who share a love for Ashtanga yoga and offered them an opportunity to immerse themselves in the practice. The classic teachings of yoga date back over 5,000 years and have taken many turns to bring us to where yoga is today in the West. Pattabhi Jois sowed the seeds of this ancient practice in the West when he made his first trip to Encinitas, California, in 1975. Since then, the popularity of yoga has increased dramatically in America and abroad. In organizing the Confluence, we wanted to give special thanks not only to Gururji, but to all of our teachers who have helped carry on Gururji's teachings in America, continuing to pave the path. We also wanted to see if we could help support the Ashtanga Yoga community with a communal gathering to inspire

all of us, teachers and students alike, as we carry on this tradition to the next generation.

The event was held from March 1st-4th, 2012 in San Diego, CA at the Catamaran Resort & Spa. It was such a tremendous success, with 400 in attendance and 500 people on a waiting list. Encouraged by this turnout, we organized a second event for 2013, to take place from February 28th – March 3rd at the same venue.

Having participated over the years in other yoga events with many different styles and teachers, Jenny Bouwer and I came together to create an 'Ashtanga only' yoga conference. After putting together a comprehensive plan for a three and a half day event, we approached our teacher Tim Miller, and his wife Carol, for their thoughts and support. Depending on their response, we were prepared to either throw in the towel or move forward. We basically felt that without their knowledge and support, it would be impossible to proceed.

¹con-flu-ence [kon-floo-uhns] noun: A flowing together of two or more streams. An act or process of merging. A coming together of people or things.



Tim Miller. Photograph by Tom Rosenthal.

We all agreed it would be an Ashtanga only conference rather than a mix of many different styles and teachings. Secondly, it would be relatively small – 350 to 400 students – with five primary students of Guruji teaching, and several others as assistants. With this intimate-style group, students could experience mostly everything together rather than having lots of choices with different classes all going on simultaneously.

We asked Tim to choose whom he thought would be the best people to come teach for the event, and to his pleasure and ours, all the people he asked said yes:

“The first four names to come to mind were Richard Freeman, David Swenson, Nancy Gilgoff and Eddie Stern. These are all friends that I have known for at least twenty years, teachers that I have great admiration and respect for, and individuals with very different personalities and teaching styles. That great common ground among us is that we were all long time students

of Pattabhi Jois and devoted teachers of his method. Miraculously, all of the teachers I invited said yes.”

We also all agreed we wanted a more spiritual and meaningful name than “conference”. Tim and Carol suggested Confluence. In India, the location where two or more rivers merge is thought to be an auspicious place of spiritual power. In the same spirit, these highly respected teachers decided to join us in a confluence* of classes, lectures, stories and events designed to share the profound gift of yoga they received from their beloved teacher, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois. Suddenly, the name Confluence was perfect. As a celebration of Guruji’s legacy, like different streams from the same source, each senior western teacher received a thorough transmission of the ashtanga yoga system from Guruji, filtered it through their own experience and developed a unique way of sharing his teachings.

PATTABHI JOIS, AFFECTIONATELY known to his students as “Guruji”,

began practicing yoga in 1927 at the age of twelve with the great yoga master T. Krishnamacharya. At the age of 15, Guruji ran away from home to study at the Sanskrit College in Mysore, where he was miraculously reconnected with his Guru. In 1937, Guruji was granted a position as yoga teacher at the Sanskrit College by the Maharajah of Mysore.

Guruji opened the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute at his home in Lakshmipuram in 1948. Over the years, Guruji successfully treated cases of diabetes, asthma, polio, heart disease and even one leprosy case with a combination of yoga therapy and diet.

WHEN WE ASKED EDDIE TO GIVE US A summary of his experience at the first annual Confluence, he said:

“It is only by sharing teachings, retelling stories, and listening to each others experiences that the spiritual imperatives of a tradition stay alive and vibrant, and remain in the world for new generations of seekers to benefit from.



Eddie Stern. Photograph by Tom Rosenthal.

During the Confluence, this is exactly what we did. We told stories about Guruji, and we told our stories too, which form a part of him as well. We shared his teachings; we laughed, questioned, investigated, and at the very end, even cried a little. We did all of this out of love, devotion, and gratitude, which are the very things that the yoga texts proclaim are needed for a spiritual life.

The final mantras of the Rig Veda say:

Meet together, talk together, let your minds apprehend alike...

Common be the prayer of these assembled, common be the acquirement, common the purpose, associated be the desire. I repeat for you a common prayer...

Common by your intention, common be the wishes of your heart, common be your thoughts, so that there be union among you.

These thoughts are truly a divine aspiration; so hard to

achieve, but so worthwhile striving for. During our gathering, I think we came very close, if not all the way, towards entering into this space, and I am very grateful to have been able to sit along side Tim Miller, Nancy Gilgoff, David Swenson and Richard Freeman, who are among Pattabhi Jois's most talented and senior teachers, and for whom I have much love, admiration and respect, for this momentous occasion."

HAVING DAVID SWENSEN WAS A completer joy; he later wrote to us:

"For the five teachers: Nancy Gilgoff, Tim Miller, Richard Freeman, Eddie Stern and myself plus an equal number of assistants: Mary Taylor, Leah Nicole, Johnny Smith, Noah Williams and my wife Shelley Washington, we all felt Guruji's presence within the energy and breath during the practice sessions as well as a glimpse into a por-

tion of the heritage he left behind in the form of words, thoughts and remembrances shared during the panel discussions.

Many participants commented that they enjoyed the panel discussions the most of all. I personally felt so honored to be there listening to the other teachers, my friends, expounding upon the depth of their understandings of the practice, philosophy and life-tools gained from their decades of practice. It was a testament to the power of the system and also to the underlying thread of breath that connects us all. There were certainly differences of opinions on some topics but there was also a deep and resounding respect for each other. It was an important moment to acknowledge differences, accept changes and revel in the common love, respect and inspiration we each feel for each other and Ashtanga Yoga as a lifelong journey and valuable tool that we are all blessed to have been touched by."



David Swensen. Photograph by Tom Rosenthal.

WE WERE SO HONORED WHEN Richard Freeman said he could come to the Confluence. These five teachers together were illuminating. This was Richards's response to his experience:

"The Confluence was a delightful, flowing together of five different strands and interpretations of the same system, which Pattabhi Jois has passed on to us. I was struck (but certainly not surprised) by the easy camaraderie amongst all of the teachers, assistants, and most of all the amazing practitioners who came. It was nice to be in a conference-like setting where no one was placing an exclusive trip on anyone or trying to claim the entire art of Ashtanga yoga as their own; and in fact, this is what has always attracted me to the overall Ashtanga community.

Another thing which stunned me, was how funny all of the presenters were, and at the same time how down to earth and practical they were in their demonstrated

ability to really help students and practitioners of all levels and all ages. And even more stunning was the simple devotion that I found amongst the practitioners who were in attendance; their devotion to just practicing! Everyone was open and curious about all of the different limbs of the yoga tradition and it seemed that everyone was respectful of each other's unique methods and contributions.

The talks and panel discussions were inspiring to me because everyone had different wonderful insights into the fundamental priorities, techniques and philosophies of the yoga sutra and all were able to apply them to the here and now.

The devotion and love for Pattabhi Jois which spilled out of the presenters and many participants as well I believe would have pleased him to no end. The story telling and reminiscing brought back many memories, which I had forgotten and which keep taking me to that ecstatic and loving space which we all share. And last, but

not least, to have all of the organizers of the event participating in and understanding the yoga was a truly unique and refreshing aspect to the Confluence. I'm very happy and honored to have been part of it."

WE WERE THRILLED TO HAVE Nancy Gilgoff come to San Diego from Hawaii to reunite with her friends and teach us how she was taught. This is what she said:

"In 1973, when I was taught by Pattabhi Jois for the first time, he taught me in a "different" way than ashtanga yoga is generally taught, with fewer vinyasas and often joining groups of poses together."

We look forward to Nancy's 2013 class where she will share with us the practice as it was taught to her at that time. We are also thrilled that Dena Kingsberg, a student of Gururji's for twenty five years, will be joining us next year, from Byron Bay, Australia. We look forward to the second Confluence! ❖



Richard Freeman. Photograph by Tom Rosenthal.

NĀMARŪPA ASKED JENNY BOUWER ...
WHY THE CONFLUENCE?
HOW DID THE IDEA ARISE??

"TIM ALWAYS SAYS A YOGA PRACTICE is like a life well lived; in the end, if you have worked hard, you can rest peacefully, knowing that you have done your best. This is *Savasana*. As yogis, we practice this letting go and this surrender each time we finish a yoga practice.

I feel that the Ashtanga yoga community was brought together and was collectively deeply moved by Guruji's passing; thousands felt some heartfelt emotion in some way. His dedication to his lineage and his loyalty to teaching has been brought to light more now than ever. His passing has made his students and followers truly embrace the heart of the practice, its discipline and its purity.

The heart of the Confluence is to continue sharing and bringing together Ashtanga yoga teachers and students for the love of the practice, for the lineage of the teachings, and for the sacred knowledge from India, passed down for thousands of years. The purpose of the Confluence is to receive the teachings from the teachers who have come before us; we are here still practicing today so that we can all learn. The Confluence will begin to move to different locations around the world so that we can continue to come together to share, remember, study, and preserve the tradition and the purity of this method." ❖

PLEASE VISIT

www.ashtangayogaconfluence.com
to learn more about the next
ASHTANGA YOGA CONFLUENCE to be
held in San Diego, California from
February 28 - March 3, 2013.



Nancy Gilgoff. Photograph by Tom Rosenthal.

ॐ

स्वस्ति प्रजाभ्यः परिपालयन्तां न्यायेन मार्गेण महौ महीशाः ।
गोब्राह्मणेभ्यः शुभमस्तु नित्यं लोकाः समस्ताः सुखिनो भवन्तु ॥

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः

Om

*svasti prajābyaḥ paripālayantāṁ nyāyena mārgēṇa mahīm mahīśāḥ |
go-brāhmaṇebhyaḥ śubham astu nityaṁ lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu ||
Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ*

May the rulers of the earth protect the well-being of the people,
by means of the virtuous path.

May there be eternal good fortune for all living beings.

May the inhabitants of all the worlds be full of happiness.


Om peace, peace, peace!



Class. Photograph by Lena Gardelli.

THE CITY OF LIGHT

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY HEATHER ELTON



MY TRAVELS IN VARANASI TAKE ME along the Ganga, to Manikarnika Ghat, the Aghori ashram, and along the Panchakroshi pilgrimage circuit to uncover a sacred city in the shape of a cosmic mandala.

AIR

I'VE WAITED UNTIL NOW, MY SEVENTH trip to India, to visit Varanasi, due to both my esteem for this sacred city and my fear of death. The fear was partly a result of people telling me that they got so sick here they thought they would die (or at least they wanted to); I was also not sure if I was ready to confront death on the cremation ghats. I also needed a serious enough spiritual practice to enable me to understand what was really going on in the most sacred, and oldest, living city in the world, dating back several thousand years.

Varanasi, or Kashi as it is sometimes known, is revered in Hindu and Buddhist texts, including the *Puranas*, the *Rig-Veda*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It's believed that those who enter Varanasi will be reborn into a sacred cosmos. The city itself was conceived as a reflection on earth of the divine order above. Of course, not being Hindu, all

of this is a vague abstract concept to me but my mind is always open to genuine spiritual experiences. Since time immemorial, Varanasi has been a place preferred by the Gods, demi-gods, sages, poets, kings and ordinary people. And indeed, if it was good enough for the Buddha, Patanjali, Parshvanatha (the leading prophet of Jainism) and great poets like Kabir, I, too, want to experience its magnetic, or cosmic, power.

Most people here believe that Varanasi was really founded by Siva several thousand years ago as his 'Forest of Bliss,' and that everything here, even the pebbles and dust, is pervaded by his existence. His lingams number in the thousands, like little sprouts arisen out of sheer bliss, and every place in the city is linked to one of his legends, or his 64 incarnations, or his 1008 names. He is worshipped as Vishveshvara (the Lord of the Universe), Mahadeva (the Great Lord), Panchanana (the five-headed one), Mahakala (the

mighty time that restlessly destroys everything). He is the terrible Bhairava, the Lord of the spirits that dwells in the cremation grounds where he performs the dance of destruction and creation. He is the iconic Maha Yogin smeared in cremation ash, his dreadlocked hair adorned with the crescent moon and the Ganga waters; in fact, Siva played a big part in bringing the Ganga to earth. His garland is strung with skulls and a poisonous cobra writhes around his neck. He drinks bhang and eats datura; his throat has turned blue from the poison he holds suspended there to stop it from engulfing the whole of the universe. He is intoxicated with bliss. The Trishul (trident) is his weapon, representing the triple aspect of creation (Brahma), maintenance (Vishnu) and destruction (Siva) of the world. The sound of his damaru, the hourglass-shaped drum, is the eternal cosmic play of creation and dissolution. My western mind is



intrigued by all these stories, but my quest is an understanding of Siva as pure awareness, pure consciousness, *purusha*, being totally aware that a dualistic mind is in fact one of the greatest obstacles to overcome on the spiritual path.

And so, I arrived in this cosmic city known as Kashi, Varanasi, Banaras, or Benaras (as the British misunderstood it) on a train from Bodhgaya. Stepping out on to the platform I'm met by a rather handsome Brahmin man, Umesh, who is my guide. Impressed that he found me so fast, I happily sacrifice my independence into his capable hands. Umesh takes me to the comfortable Sahi Guesthouse on Assi Ghat, where one of my students, Nuria, has decided to join me. We have both read Robert Svoboda's *Aghora: At the Left Hand of God* about Aghori yogis living in the charnel grounds, eating their food from human skulls, sleeping on cremation graves, and worshipping the scary blue deity,

Jai Ma; we had a plan to investigate this tantric tradition. She is keen to experience life in the *smashan*, the cremation ground. Always the dutiful teacher, I suggest a sunset walk along the Ganga and, in no time, we find ourselves at Harishchandra Ghat (the smaller cremation ghat); as I glance upwards I get my first glimpse of an Aghori. A young man is sitting on a window ledge dressed totally in black with a necklace of skulls. Jai Ma! We have arrived.

WATER

JUST BEFORE DAWN, WE SLIP INTO A small wooden boat and float along the mighty Ganga. It's so pleasurable, gently drifting across the water as the city awakens. I can see why devout Hindus refer to Varanasi as "Kashi" – the Luminous One, the City of Light. In the *Kashi Kanda* (26.27), Siva resides on the three high peaks that encompass Varanasi (his three-pronged weapon,

the Trishul) and spreads light all around the city. Bliss and light are one. I get a glimpse of luminosity as the morning sun spreads across the river and strikes the high-banked face of this city, coloring the ghats rose.

The river is broad and there is nothing built on the opposite bank – just a wide sandy beach receding into the distance and then a line of trees. 20,000 Hindus a day bathe in the river to purify themselves. Everyone comes here to perform morning ablutions. Young Brahmin priests dressed in traditional red lungis wash out puja bowls on the banks of the river. People sit in silent meditation; others delight in storytelling. Somewhere bells are ringing. Women wash clothes while wet ones dry in the sun; meters of brightly coloured saris stretch across the ghats. Buffalo lounge in the water. There are endless scenes: elders tenderly helping each other to dress, hippies smoking chillums in conversation



with Indian mystics, wandering widows, wandering bulls, holy Sadhus, and ascetics (sanyasi) sitting on the colossal flights of stone steps leading down to the water's edge.

Of the 84 ghats that line the curve of the Ganga, five of them are considered most sacred as they represent the bodily parts of Lord Siva. I try to visualize the supine form of the Siva with his head at Assi Ghat, chest at Dashaswamedh, navel at Manikarnika, thighs at Panchganga and feet at Adi Keshav, but it is too vast. I find the idea of his navel residing at Manikarnika fascinating in the sense that the main element here is fire, something that mirrors Tantric systems where the Manipura chakra, at the navel, in the subtle energy body, also represents fire. The navel is the site where heat is created to stimulate the Kundalini energy and transcend to the spirit realm.

I can imagine the Vedic horse sacrifices performed by Hindus on Dashaswamedh Ghat in 2 BCE, with horrific images of fresh blood seeping into the Ganga, and wonder what the contemporary version is today and why sacrifice really is necessary; I feel a surge of disdain for religion but let the aversion pass, erase the stain of momentary perception, and come back to the present moment and my breath.

I feel like a character inside a film. Drifting past the ghats is like watching the history of India unfold before my eyes – the post-Vedic world dissolves into the medieval period of Muslim invaders and the imperious Raj Kingdoms, through the East India Company (1764), Indian Independence (15th August 1947), and into the modern world. I'm really overcome by the grandeur of the Mother Ganga, the myriad temple spires, and the Mughal-style sandstone pavilions, the palaces at water's edge, and the seamless life on the ancient ghats. Many structures seem to be falling down, but the decay only adds a patina of authenticity. Time stands still, and I'm suspended in some dream-like sensation of floating through the city of Gods.

I feel as if I could simply disappear into this City of Light, dissolve into the liquid form of Siva – the crescent shape of the Ganga. I feel a great sense of peace

that comes with deep understanding. Yet, as I look into the muddy brown water it doesn't take long before my intellect drags me back to more mundane view and I wonder if a burned limb will float by and just how filthy is this holy water that purifies sins? I light a small votive floating candle and send it adrift in the water, precariously on a leaf, along with my prayers to embrace *moksha* (liberation). The pink rays of dawn color the water rose. A couple of years back, in Delhi, a Vedic astrologer did a reading for me and ominously said that the only way I could tone down the strong transits of Pluto that continuously plague me was to find a rusty nail ring from Varanasi. I spot the perfect nail in the boat and when I mention this to Umesh he says he'll take care of it. Melodic chanting floats in the air. Instead of hearing some traditional Indian bhajans, the voice carried across the Ganga this morning belongs to none other than the American devotional singer Krishna Das! I get a good chuckle over the irony of this, but realise it's a sign of the sacred and mundane merging. Varanasi is part of the global economy; Krishna Das is a kirtan master whose records sales probably surpass those of Ravi Shankar.

Well before we get to Manikarnika ghat, the smoke and ash from the funeral pyres cloud the landscape. It's a magnet drawing us towards its center – the navel. It's impressive, with 750 stairs leading up from the Ganga to the Old City, with ancient temples and wooden buildings turned black from centuries of smoke. Cremation fires glow through the haze, outlining the silhouettes of people moving around the ghat. Towering above is the ominous red Tarakeshvara, the most important temple on the ghat; it holds the form of Siva who imparts the liberating Taraka mantra – the 'prayer of the crossing,' – at the moment of death. *Sri Rama Jaya Rama Jaya Jaya Rama*. Lord Siva whispers the mantra into the ear of the deceased to ensure moksha and release from worldly life. *Sri* means *Shakti* or *Sita*. *Ra* symbolises the fire that burns our karma. *Ma* represents water - the peace that surpasses all understanding. *Jaya* means victory to the spirit over the flesh.





Nuria is looking ashen-faced as she stares at the burning pyres, smoldering fires, and men in mourning white intent on the bodies crackling and dissolving in the flames. Overhead the ever-present vultures circle patiently. Children play on the ghat, cows wander through, goats balance on piles of wood, feral dogs sleep in the warmth of the ashes or scavenge for remains. Bodies swathed in bright colours lie waiting for the next pyre. Workers constantly tend the pyres to keep them burning. Jutting from the stacked logs, I can make out a human limb, or head, of one of the departed. The endless cycle of life and death stabs me in my belly as I contemplate *samsara*.

I remember my first true understanding of death. I was about eleven years old, sitting in our old Studebaker car outside a shopping mall in Calgary with my father when he told me that he wanted to be cremated when he died. I felt physically sick at the thought of losing him. Decades later, when he

finally passed, I felt honoured to be with him in his final days, sending him love and sweetly soothing him, it remains one of my most cherished and sacred spiritual experiences. I released his ashes into the five elements high in the Canadian Rockies – into the sky, wind, earth, and torrential waterfall to echo the sound of water for eternity. Fire carried my prayers for a good rebirth or eternal peace. Here now in Varanasi, through the seeming horror of it all, the scene is somehow peaceful and uninterrupted. Perhaps Siva really is personally delivering the deceased to Nirvana, or else people have come to embody and accept the reality that everyone we ever know will eventually die, including our selves and that this is not necessarily a sad thing, rather a cause for celebration of living a good life.

Our boat docks at Manikarnika Ghat. The cremation ground got its name because of its proximity to Varanasi's most

sacred pool, the Manikarnika Kund. Also known as Chakrapusharini, or Discus Lotus-Pond, it is the world's first pool and tirtha. According to the *Kashi Kanda*, Vishnu carved this beautiful lotus pool with his discus (*chakra*) and filled it up with his sweat. His work completed, Vishnu sat nearby for eons performing fierce austerities. Siva apparently was so impressed with Vishnu's devotion that he shook with delight and lost his jeweled earring, Manikarnika, in the pond. Each year when the Ganga recedes, alluvial silt is left in the tank but then it refills, miraculously, in time for Sivaratri, a yearly festival in reverence of Lord Siva. I climb down the perfectly symmetrical stone-stepped sides to the pond and feel the exceptionally silky water from the Ganga. A Brahmin man smiles at me, his hands in Namaskar, and I feel a beautiful connection as his divine being greets my divine essence, and again I feel drawn deeper into the sacred city.

Beside the tank is the small Adi Kesava temple, which has a set of Vishnu's marble footprints, also known as Charanapaduka. Vishnu apparently stood in meditation here for about 500,000 years to please Siva. I have a small silver charm of Vishnu's feet on my pendant and the priest blesses it with a red puja mark. I feel a genuine surge of true devotion, perhaps because Vishnu's feet have been part of my life for many years. 'Om vande gurunam caranaravinde' is how the Astanga yoga chant (an excerpt from the epic poem the *Yoga Taravali*) begins and I've said it over 10,000 times. It makes reference to bowing to the feet of the guru, the feet of Vishnu, ultimately your own Inner Guru, which is where the yoga journey leads. This is the first of the 108 shrines on the famous Panchakroshi pilgrimage route and I appreciate that Umesh has chosen to bring us to this temple first.

We disappear into the labyrinth of meandering narrow serpentine alleys of the Old City. Shafts of light penetrate through the darkness, illuminating the mysticism. The back-



streets are drenched in the fragrance of incense and puja flowers. Snake charmers, murti carvers, dreadlocked hippies, pilgrims, mutilated beggars, spiritual wannabes and saffron-clad sadhus haunt the streets lined with ornately carved doorways and exquisite decaying houses. Umesh leads us to the epicenter of Siva's city, the Vishvanath Temple (Golden Temple) that was partially destroyed by the Muslim rulers who built a mosque on the site. There are armed soldiers on the streets guarding both the mosque and the temple, and only Hindus are allowed inside. We must be satisfied with a glimpse through a crack in the wall and I can see the gold gilded roof. A feeling of resentment arises because I'm not allowed into the temple. It turns out that an exact replica has been built at the University of Benares and we may visit it. I turn my back on religion and try to get lost in the maze of lanes that always return to the Ganga. Eventually, we end a brilliant morning with a delicious South Indian breakfast of idli and masala dosa, made by a street vendor outside the South Indian ghat. It's as fresh and tasty as any in Mysore. Exhausted, we collapse into one of Varanasi's oldest chai shops and watch the world unfold around us.

FIRE

VARANASI IS SEARING HOT AND THE hidden streets in the Old City are probably the coolest place to be. I'm sipping a refreshing pomegranate and coconut lassi at the famous Blue Lassi shop; I watch the lassi walla churn the curd with a big stick, spoon it into a disposable clay pot, the yogurt spilling over the edges, and decorate it with fruits, seeds and nuts. Nuria says, 'Did you see the corpse on the corner?' Suddenly, I hear someone shout "*Rama Nam Satya Hai*." I expect to see a dead body on the street, but it's a funeral procession carrying a corpse wrapped with sparkly red and gold fabric and marigold garlands on a decorated bamboo pier (plank). Everyone gets out of the way. I feel a physical contraction in my body and I realise how rare it is to see a corpse in the western world. "*Ram Nam Satya Hai*" is the final mantra before cremation. Even though I see death all around me, and intellectually I know that we all eventually die, somewhere deep inside I still think it won't happen to me.

The street leads to Manikarnaka. Probably all streets lead to Manikarnika as it is the center of the city. There is a saying in Varanasi that the ghats are not

there for the city, but the city exists for the ghats. The British finally understood this after years of attempting unsuccessfully to outlaw the burnings. We walk through the narrow lanes lined with spiritual tourists, dreadlocked Israelis, ash-smearing aghoris, wallas of every description balancing god-knows-what on their heads, well-fed goats, dogs like walking skeletons with horrid skin diseases, lazy cows and hard-working black buffalos, rusting bicycles, youth on aggressive honking scooters, and many men drinking chai. Above are glittering temples, spires and domes, and wooden doorways with decorative carvings from another time. Beneath my feet are eons of filth; horrid scents rise up, soon to be washed away by sweet fragrance of puja flowers.

I can tell we're close to Manikarnaka Ghat when the shops sell death supplies and monumental piles of dark brown wood, hacked roughly to lengths of about five feet, are stacked seven and eight feet high, ready for the fires below. There is an endless cycle of slightly built men carrying armloads of wood. So much wood, it looks like a city of wood... a fallen 'forest of bliss.' We're down wind and can feel the heat of the fires and ash. My eyes sting as the air is heavy with the smells of burning wood, incense, and



a somewhat disturbingly sweet aroma. Suddenly, the zigzag stone ghat steps appear and the whole of Manikarnika comes into view. There are hundreds of men. No women here except for a few foreign tourists. Only men take part in the cremation ceremony as no one can cry or the soul is held back. Even the wife of the deceased stays at home. Nuria is a bit overwhelmed by the heat, but mostly the men, and looks like a ghost. I sit her down in the shade with a bottle of water, while I explore further. Part of my sadhana is the *Mahasmashan*, the great creation ground.

The *Skanda Purana* (IV.30.103-104) explains the word: *Maha* means *great* and *sma* means *corpse*, and *shana* means *final rest*. In the Vedic tradition, important life events are marked by religious ceremonies. The final ceremony after death is *Antyeshti*. *Anta* literally means *end*, and *eshti* is *wish, desire, seeking to go towards*. This is the final *Yagna* (sacrifice), when the body itself is offered to *Agni* (fire) – the final purification rite to reduce the bonds between the subtle body and the gross body. In the *Antyeshti* ceremony, the body's five basic components – known as *panch bhutas* – *prithvi* (earth), *jal* (water), *tej* (fire), *vayu* (wind) and *akash* (space) are returned to the universe, thus maintaining the cosmic equilibrium.

For a Hindu, existence does not begin with birth and end with the death of the physical body. There is an indweller called *jiva* (soul) that manifests in a given body in order to experience the results of its previous karmas. At the time of death, the *jiva* gives up its current form to assume another more suitable one to continue its experiences based on the results of prior karmas. *Antyeshti* serves to dispose of the body, equips the soul for the scary transitory journey to *Yamaloka*, and frees the soul from the pollution caused by death. Until this ritual is performed, the soul is believed to remain on earth, where it flits about restlessly as a *preta* (ghost). Ultimately, Hindus aspire to no more rebirth, and in most places, this is only possible for those beings who have worked through their past karmas and have lived a life of merit. But here in





Varanasi, cremation at Manikarnika Ghat ensures liberation and the end of worldly existence.

O Jiva! After thy death, may all the components of thy body be merged into the five elements. May the power of thy sight be absorbed into the sun and thy breath be absorbed into the air. May thy other parts be absorbed into appropriate elements. And in accordance with the meritorious deed thou hast performed here, may thy spirit dwell in the appropriate body.

The Rig-Veda

Varanasi is the city of death and people come here to die from all over India, and from as far away as London. There is a stream of corpses and the fires burn continuously. Everywhere I encounter *ghatias*, the ghat-priests. They are Doms, the lowest of the 'untouchable caste,' responsible for performing the funeral rites and dealing with dead bodies. Apparently, they are all part of one original family that has been in charge of the Ghat for several thousand years and, not

surprisingly, their members are among the ten wealthiest families in Varanasi. If you don't like their price, they'll tell you take your corpse somewhere else. More than 38,000 corpses are cremated here in a year, over 100 a day, and the fires burn ceaselessly. Around 100 families comprise a clan; each has a specific task – selling the wood, collecting the money, stoking the fires of the dead, tending to sacred fire that has burned for 3,000 years and is the source of fire for all the cremations. They are part of the paradox of life here; they perform a duty that makes them the most polluted of the untouchable casts, yet they are indispensable for the most sacred ritual in Hinduism.

There is an air of casualness to it all, no doubt from millennia of routine, yet there is a level of organization and attention to detail that simply staggers my mind. Everyone is watching me and I'm followed wherever I go. It might be my camera, or the innate opportunism to make money from tourists. Photography is strictly forbidden here, or is it?

One Dom tells me I can shoot anything except the bodies. No problem. Another says, "No photography without the official documents." In truth, pay a little money and you can do what you want. I end up in a high wooden tower next to the burning place and watch the ceremony unfold.

A dozen fires burn in shallow ashy pits. People say that at the end everyone dies equally, but even here there are separate areas for rich, middle class and poor people, and the size of the pyre depends on how much wood you can afford. The death ritual starts with the body facing south, the abode of Yama the god of Death. Then the feet, or sometimes the entire lower half of the body, are soaked in the river to prevent *prana* (the vital principle) from leaving the body inauspiciously through one of its lower openings. The chief mourner, who is usually the eldest son, with his head shorn and dressed in white, walks five times around the body to represent the five elements that are given back to their source. He pours Ganga water into

the mouth of the deceased and puts sandalwood and butter oil on the body. He lights the pyre with reeds lit from the eternal sacred fire. The ghatias then tend the pyre by turning the logs to ensure the burning is complete. It takes 350kg (750lbs) of wood to burn a body properly and the cremation lasts about three hours.

I'm looking at this scene through my 300 mm lens when, suddenly, I see a half burned man with his legs sticking out of a pyre. It's a truly disturbing and shocking sight and I feel the image sear the inside of my mind – something that will remain with me for a long time. Those who can't afford the required amount of wood, leave behind half burned body parts, which are then thrown into the Ganga, if not eaten by dogs. The sternum and ribcage of men and pelvis of women rarely burn to ash. Bizarrely, special snapping turtles have been bred to consume the body parts and are released into the river for this purpose; they have been taught to consume only dead human flesh and do not bother swimmers and bathers. These turtles consume about a pound of flesh a day and can reach a size of 70 pounds. The only exceptions to cremation are holy men, pregnant women, people with leprosy or chicken pox, those bitten by snakes, those who have committed suicide, and children under five. Instead, their bodies are weighed down with stones and lowered into the Ganga. Since the 90s, the Indian government has set up electric crematoriums in most urban centers, including Varanasi, an option for poor people as it is far less expensive, but still most people come here to receive the ancient funeral rites. It is really difficult for India's poor to afford enough wood for their deaths. They have to begin saving in their youth.

Near the ghat are numerous hospices where the elderly and terminally ill come to die and spend their last moments on the banks of the Mother Ganga. I feel truly honored to be present in this 'holy of holiest places,' where our world and the next world meet. I decide to buy some wood for a poor person and help to create an auspicious end to their earthly life. I take a long look into the

eyes of this rather well-groomed ghata, searching for true compassion, and wonder if he'll just pocket my money, but then realise all I can do is offer the gift. After that it's his karma. I give the money to an old woman who manages the lodge and nurses the old people who live out their days in the hospice. I receive their blessing and return to the ghat steps where I left Nuria. As we turn our backs on Manikarnika we feel the strong force of spiritual magnetism, the sacred bondage between place and person. A power that enhances the sensitivity to the 'crossings' from this world to the world beyond, where humanity meets divinity. We're certain that the Hindu faith in the sacred fire will keep Manikarnika burning bright for centuries to come.

The Atman (soul) can never be cut to pieces by a weapon, nor burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor dried by the wind.

Bhagavad Gita (2-23)





EARTH

EVERY MAJOR SACRED SITE IN INDIA exists in Varanasi, not just in a mystical sense, but there are exact scaled-down versions of original temples here. People believe that if you come to Varanasi, you can forego all other spiritual wanderings. We follow Umesh through the narrow lanes behind the ghats packed with ancient temples. I attend numerous pujas, am blessed and blessed again, and steal glimpses of the residing deities, their fierce eyes staring out from bodies swathed in exquisite fabrics. Some of the temples are quiet and a kind of solitude descends. In the more popular ones, we are continuously immersed in throngs of barefoot devotees, pushed and shoved in a heaving line leading to the inner sanctum, everyone eager to be blessed by the priest and get a glimpse of Siva, Vishnu, Ganesh, Hanuman, Kali or Durga. It's a total sensory experience with temple bells ringing, the *Hanu-*

man Chalisa chanted live in the corner, a pungent and ever present aroma of incense and fragrant flowers, mantras floating through the air. Children run and scream with excitement. I get the sense that for Indians these temple visits are a kind of pure theatre and intense socialization, a welcome opportunity to get outside of the rigid routine of their lives. There is a tangible dimension of energy here, yet often it seems laced with a kind of desperation or grasping that comes from the belief that the gods will sort out the problems in life. But I understand very little. The intensity makes me crave the serene solitude of sacred Buddhist sites high in the Himalayas. But I'm here and try to embrace the chaos, or withdraw to the sidelines where I can simply sit and observe.

On every other corner is a small shrine with a Siva lingam, set in a marble surround, with men huddled on all four sides chanting in unison and paying homage. This form of Siva exists in the

thousands, as does Nandi the bull, Siva's vehicle and the doorkeeper of Siva's temples. There are curious *murtis* (statues) of Hanuman or Ganesh, unworked 'natural' stones covered over with red cloth and with orange paint mixed with ghee. There is so much outpouring of love between the deity and the devotee. I'm deeply fascinated by this ancient ritual of *darshan* and want to 'see' and 'be seen' by the deity. I want to experience the transcendental power that will reveal my own inner guru.

In the past, a few deities have taken hold of me, but much of the time my rational mind reveals only a strange and scary looking creature and I recede, respectfully opening the space to others. Perhaps it's because I'm not Hindu, nor have I been brought up with these deities. Much as I try to shed my conditioned existential views towards religion and summon up the infinite devotion I often feel in nature, meditation and yoga, I rarely feel a genuine outpour-

ing of love for the deities. The tantric Vajrayana practice has taught me to see the outer deity only as a tool to train my mind to see its own innate essence. I don't believe that these gods actually exist. Still, my heart is touched by the strong energy that exists in places where millions of people have walked and shared a similar intention of thought, or prayers, for the benefit of all living beings.

A mysterious site stirs my imagination. Lolark Kund is an ancient Solar-Saivite site of worship, first mentioned in the *Rig Veda* (2nd millennium BCE). Three colossal staircases descend steeply, 15 m below street level, to a sacred well in the shape of a keyhole. *Lolark* means *trembling sun* and at different times during the day, the wavering face of Lord Surya (the Sun God) is reflected in the water as pure light. It's the most southern of the 12 sun shrines along the Ganga at Varanasi; each of the shrines marks the exact spot of the cusp between one zodiacal sign and the next. Recent observations have shown the siting to be absolutely correct. I feel a deep reverence for nature here, and am in awe of the ingenious design of the ancients that reveals the path of the sun throughout the year, as well as astronomical events such as total solar eclipses and meteor showers.

I notice that despite being a Brahmin, Umesh rarely takes prasad or enters the inner sanctums. I ask him why and he says he only worships Durga after his bi-annual fast, or its too intense, and can actually be destructive. I think of all the blessings I've received and feel as if I might dissolve. The temple where he does worship daily is the Aghori Ashram; to our surprise, it turns out that our Brahmin guide is a plain-clothed tantric aghori.

The Awadhoot Kinaram Ashram (the seat of the Aghoris in Kashi) is an imposing place enclosed within a red and white striped wall crowned with tridents that look like a vandalism deterrent. At the entrance are three skulls skewered on a trident, symbolizing Brahma, Siva and Vishnu as one being. On the top of the gate sits a large lotus flower. Aghoris are a Saivite Hindu sect believed to have





split off from the tantric Kapilaka order that dates back to 1000 BCE. It's mostly comprised of ascetic sadhus, but here in Varanasi, the ashram is filled with seemingly normal people. *A* means *not* and *ghor* means *awful, difficult*. So, *Aghor* is the easy path – a natural and spontaneous state of consciousness. It's not a cult or a religion. It's a state of reality you can experience in any tradition or ideology. Aghor is an ancient spiritual discipline that removes feelings of fear, hatred, disgust or discrimination. It's the path of utter love and devotion.

Of course, you wouldn't think this to look at the aghoris. In fact, most people find them repulsive and quite terrifying. The most serious aghoris live in the charnel grounds, dress in rags, and smear white cremation ash on their bodies and dreadlocks to look like Siva. They cook their food on the cremation pyres, use skulls as their eating bowls and sleep on graves. Sometimes, in rituals, they even eat the brains and flesh of rotting corpses. What they are really doing is trying to overcome their own feelings of disgust and embrace everything as a pure and divine emanation of Siva (pure consciousness). Our fear of death holds a great amount of energy and the best way to overcome it is to confront it. Then we realise that we're not the 'body,' but pure consciousness. If we look inside our mind we see that fear is just a concept. Fear is not real. The more we detest something, have aversions to things, the more energy we invest into it and the worse it becomes. Aghor teaches that if we can remove our judgments, opinions, and the stain of our 'view,' we can dissolve these imaginary borders and feel divinity in all things. A big part of being an Aghori is embracing the outcast – the lepers, prostitutes, widows, the destitute, and all those scorned by regular society. They're renowned for their compassion and charity work in areas that the rest of society disdains.

We enter through the imposing gate that leads through large grounds to the main temple. The *samadhis* (graves) of the 16 previous Aghori babas flank the circumference. They all sit in padmasana (lotus pose), with the left leg in first indicating the tantric path, and are yog-

ins who chose the moment of their passing. The actual body is inside a statue of remarkable likeness. An Aghori priest blesses me, dabs red tika paint between my eyebrows, and gives me prasad. Unlike most temples, where flowers and bananas are given, here we get cremation ash from the wood at Manikarnika Ghat. I approach the *dhuni* (sacred fire) that has burned continuously for 400 years, cleanse my body with smoke, and turn three times in an anti-clockwise direction. I then sit down and eat my Prasad. It tastes like ash and coats the inside of my mouth. I like the taste of charcoal and this is not much different. I believe it's pure, divinely blessed, and will not harm me. Perhaps because there are so few people here on this particular evening, or because of the strange energy of the place, I fall into deep meditation. There is something oddly comforting here.

Behind the temple is a curious tank and in the darkness it looks ominous. Large black pre-historic looking fish

swim in the greenish black water that is legendary for its medicinal powers and the healing of lepers. I gingerly step into the tank up to my thighs and feel the cold sensation of the water on my skin. It feels unbelievably silky and smooth, like velvet, and has a magnetic power that draws me deeper. I feel the thousands of years of devotion, prayer and love that have been poured into the river.

There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it although I don't see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt, yet defies all proof. It transcends the senses. Everything around me is ever changing, ever dying ... underlying all that change is a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates.

Gandhi

Suddenly, Umesh announces that the Baba will see us. I enter a small room where a very large Aghori is lying

sprawled on a bed. He is unwell. These audiences are becoming scarcer. I sit down on the floor very close to him and his enormous smiling face is close to mine. I see the effort required to lift his head. Instead of asking him questions, I simply hold his hand and feel a genuine outpouring of love for him. For a second, I worry that this might not be an appropriate action, hoping that my touch will not pollute a holy being, but instantly it feels right. Perhaps it's the magic of the Ganga water, but a tremendous compassion rises up in me and my heart opens. I feel pure grace. In retrospect, I think this was a kind of darshan, or direct transmission, in which he shared the essence of the Aghori path with me – kindness – where all spiritual paths aim to dissolve boundaries between people allowing for spontaneous connection and a recognition that we are really all one. Walking back to the hotel I feel I'm lighter than air, as if I'm floating on new Ganga legs.





ETHER

VARANASI HAS HAD MANY NAMES, but by 2 BCE, the words ‘Varanasi’ and ‘Kashi’ became synonymous for the holy city. Varanasi refers to the urban settlement, Kashi is the sacred realm encircled by the outermost pilgrimage circuit. The term *Kashi* means ‘concentration of cosmic light,’ and is first used in the *Atharva Veda* (V.22.4), a 15 BCE text that says, “Kashi shines and illuminates the universe. Kashi makes moksha (liberation) dawn on everyone by giving wisdom.”

It’s true that when you enter Varanasi, you feel reborn into a sacred cosmos. The light is luminous and I feel that magic could arise at any moment. There really is something ‘out of this world’ going on here. Kashi is said to exist in time and space separate from other places in this world. It is believed to be the embodiment of heaven on earth. Interestingly, it’s a place organized by pilgrims, rather than kings. Kashi is said to be a ‘cosmogram,’ or mandala, comprised of

an intricate web of 56 pilgrimage circuits, five of which surround the city in concentric circles. The circumference of the outer pradakshina, or Panchakroshi, defines a sacred space; all beings that die inside its boundaries are granted moksha by Siva.

Kashi is the physical expression of cosmic order with Vishvanath temple as its innermost sanctuary protected by successive shells. According to P. B. Singh in *Banarés Region: A Spiritual & Cultural Guide*, many sacred sites in India duplicate a celestial realm and reflect cosmos-magical power. Kashi is a celestial-archetypal city where three parallel realities exist together as a sacred spatial system. If one walks the pilgrimage circuits, the cosmogram is made spatially visible, weaving together the macrocosmos (cosmos/heaven), mesocosmos (material world/earth) and microcosmos (temple/human body). These three realms come together around a central axis on which the cosmos turns, and is considered to be a communication link between heaven and earth. This axis

mundi is similar to *kundalini* in Laya Yoga and other tantric practices where energy rises up the *sushumna nadi* and pierces the chakras as it ascends.

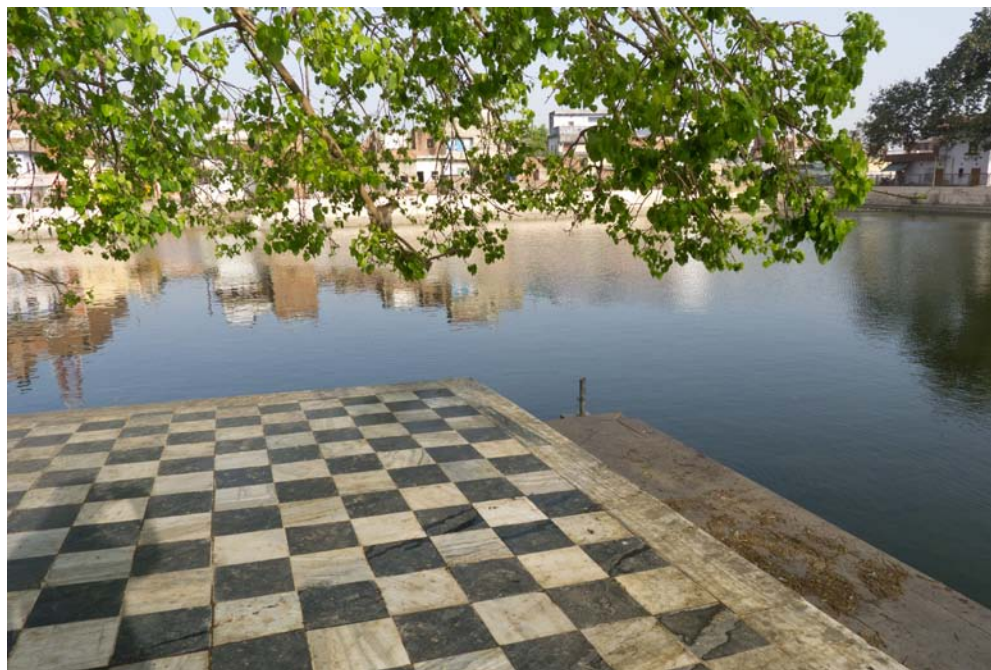
Varanasi is the mesocosmos in which the human complexity of the microcosmos and the cosmic-temporal stability of the macrocosmos come together. The epicenter of the world is Jnanavapi Kupa, the ‘well of wisdom’ or *gyotilingam* in Kashi Vishvanath Temple. It’s here that Siva dug into the earth with his trident to cool the lingam. The waters that sprang up were the liquid form of *jnana*, the light of wisdom. The act of circumambulation around the symbolic center of the universe enables pilgrims to perceive the universe in its entirety, to experience and imitate the primordial rhythm of the cosmos, and ultimately to merge with the cosmos and the Absolute.

The five pilgrim circuits (Caurasikroshi, Panchakroshi, Nagara Pradakshina, Avimukta and Antargrha) represent the five elements (earth/water/fire/wind/ether), five parts of the human body (head/legs/face/blood/heart), five

stages of transcendental power (consciousness/action/cognition/wisdom/bliss), the five sheaths (food/mind/breath/intellect/bliss), and the corresponding sacred number of shrines/images on the route, to merge the human and the divine. I can't tell you any more, as I honestly don't know. The concept alone is sublimely beautiful, but almost incomprehensible to my not-so-subtle mind. It is certainly beyond the scope of my intellect. The only way to realise a city believed to be 'out of this world' is to experience it through walking. And millions of pilgrims have tread on the path that leads them from outer to inner space.

As a modern yogi running out of time, I jump on the back of Umesh's scooter and travel out into the ether and circumambulate the Pancakroshi Yatra in one afternoon. This cosmic circuit is one of the oldest pilgrim routes in India. It's 55 miles/88.5 km in length, takes five days to walk, and has 108 shrines along the way. The number 108 refers to 12 months in a year (or 12 zodiacs of the cosmic circuit) x the 9 planets in Hindu cosmology. I have no idea I'm inside a sacred mandala, nor do I understand the symbolism of the yatra, but I experience the five gross elements in my body and they are blissful. If only the gods were so lucky to feel human form. Sounds become vibration, wind touches my heart, I smell the earth, taste the water in sacred tanks, and my inner *agni* (fire) is ignited in ancient shrines, where I both see and am seen by the residing deity. I listen both to the vibration from the scooter's motor and the sound of AUM in my heart. There are beautiful temples situated on exquisite tanks, sacred fields, stone carvings of yogis and goddesses, mud-waddled houses and piles of cow dung patties, chai shops – all dotted along a rural landscape seemingly untouched by the modern world.

I understand the importance of effort and intention on a spiritual path and have utmost respect for the pilgrims. It must be incredibly powerful to actually walk this route, and pray at each shrine with full knowledge as to who the deity is and what it represents, as well as to witness day dissolving into night, the



motion of the planet, to feel a part of the cosmos. Even on a motorbike, I like to believe that once inside the mandala, its magical force, seen or unseen, will realign my own being with the cosmic spatial system, purify my karmic actions, transform physical substance with the power of the spirit, allow me to see the divine light, merge with all that is around me, and move closer to my own liberation.

In Jonathan P. Parry's book, *Death in Benares*, he writes that Kashi is

both preserved from the ravages of time and that time has indeed taken its toll. "It is not Kashi itself which has degenerated, but man's ability to perceive it. The soil is gold, the city is suspended in space and Siva does wander in it daily; and if we cannot see all this it is because we do not have the 'divine sight' of a yogi."

I'll be forever grateful to my brilliant guide, Umesh, who revealed the magic of his city, this most sacred of holy cities, with genuine devotion and yogic

insight. I'm not sure how to drag myself away, except to say that my excellent guide puts me safely on to a train heading north. As I board the train he hands me two polished iron rings, sliced from the boat ring, and they fit perfectly. I feel the heaviness of Pluto recede behind the clouds. —

Om Namah Sivaya.

Heather Elton is a yogini, writer and photographer living in London.

