

Yoga bear

By Stuart White
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Retreat from the rat race and rediscover yourself. That was my Christmas present/promise to myself last year. After months of dabbling in yoga, reading spiritual books and meditating on meditation, I felt that I needed more to take me forward on my journey towards finding inner peace and balance in my life. I was full of questions, experiencing a mini-spiritual crisis (my cynical friends read mid-life) and impatient to find the answers. With the words of George Harrison echoing in my mind "Everything else can wait, but the search for God cannot..." I resolved to take action.

And just like George Harrison and the rest of the Beatles in search of enlightenment I arranged to visit an Ashram outside the holy city of Rishikesh in India. There are thousands of reasons why people flock on pilgrimage to India. Mine was twofold – firstly to explore and expand my spiritual side which included improving my yoga abilities (I am as flexible as an iron rod) as well as learning how to meditate and spend some time to 'find myself', and God, and anyone else who came knocking blah, blah, blah

I realised I had entered the abyss when soon after check in to Pool Chatti Ashram I discovered I could not get a cell phone signal. I had accepted that in order to find God and myself I might have to intermittently switch off my cell phone cos I know that there can be interference with sound waves, spiritual vibrations etc, but this was feeling like too much of a sacrifice – I was going to be there for a whole week. I thought I could at least check in with the real world occasionally, as if obtaining spiritual enlightenment was much like attending a workshop with convenient breaks scheduled for refreshments, bathrooms and phone home time. Anyhow, at this point I was not too perturbed and I guessed I could short circuit this cruel hand of fate by walking 2km distance first in one direction then another to get a signal. It was all to no avail - I was in a dip – literally and figuratively, there was no signal anywhere. I was completely cut off from the outside world.

When I was first shown to my room and saw accommodation that could best be described as basic, if not cell-like, with large gaps in the windows to let the chilly winds in, I thought 'this is OK - 'it's only a week'. However, when I saw the ablution facilities, it was clear I was going to be tested to the hilt! Finding solace in the belief that suffering supposedly takes one closer to God, I resolved to embrace the daily routine of waking up to freezing temperatures for meditation, followed by breathing exercises, yoga, meditative walks all done in complete silence. A brief reprieve around lunch time (only vegetarian food) to chat, wash lunch dishes and chill/warm up (read, do your washing and find some sun – it was so cold) before going back to yoga, chanting and meditation and back to your cell - I mean room - in time for bed.

I was to stay in the Ashram for 7 days and developed a countdown strategy to get through it. Each day I started crossing off the time left - much like a prisoner counts down his sentence, awaiting his release. You see, no one goes to an Ashram for fun. For many it has a feel of penance about it. Its hardly a holiday resort and students' agendas (yes you are there to learn) vary as much as the personalities you find there; bankrupt business owners, merry widows, nervous breakdown recoveries, hippies, spiritual refugees - but one thing everyone had in common was that they all had purpose for being there - mostly a personal and private one. Not surprisingly every person at the Ashram was single - I guess couples don't go to pseudo-prison camps for the Christmas holidays.

The first few days I felt almost in panic, trying to make sense of the experience. With an erudite mentality it felt important to try and label what I was feeling, compute the benefits and somehow prove that I was making progress. And then I had an "on the road to Damascus" moment – less dramatic but just as powerful. I suddenly became conscious that the whole point was that there was no need to make sense of the moment. There was no need to evaluate or judge what I was experiencing. No one else cared - this was just about me. I could choose to just be in the moment and be. And so I stopped counting the days and started enjoying the experience.

I haven't had years of spiritual living, visiting India or studying at an Ashram, but I do feel like the time that I spent there has given me a very different perspective on how to approach life and also take care of myself for the future. In the few months since my return, I have slowly began to realise how beautiful and how momentous daily life can be if you allow it. How life is full of possibility and how I am full of possibility. I learned that we spend far too much time feeling we are in prison, forever awaiting our release, when in fact we envy freedom looking through the bars of an open cage. We spend far too much time trying to 'do time' as if somehow at the end of it all things will be better when in fact today can be better if you live in the moment. I spent so much time counting down my time at the Ashram that I forgot to enjoy the experience and savour the moment.

We should not spend our time in waiting...for the next best thing, for the now to be over, but rather extract as much as we can from every day. I had been viewing everyday work and life as a transitional state of deprivation, just as I initially did of the prison-like cell, no phone signal, forced silence and no meat to eat – but counting off seven days is one thing – do we really want to count our lives away as well, in a constant state of putting up with it for now? If we can rather extract the good bits and allow ourselves to enjoy them and go with the flow for all the rest we will find a balance and feel much happier. And every little inner and outer challenge you meet and overcome is all part of the learning curve. Simply put, in life - as in the gym - no pain, no gain!

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