

Report to LUTSF from Marian McHugh

JOURNEY TO INDIA

On November 12th 2003, I went to Kerala in Southern India. The aims of the trip were twofold. Firstly, to study and develop my practice of yoga in its birthplace, secondly, to use this experience to develop my work as a drama and movement therapist in mental health. In particular, my aim was to do yoga pranayama breath work in sessions with clients with agitation and anxiety disorders.

In India I explored yoga in three different settings, these included the Sivananda Yoga Ashram, Group Yoga and ayurvedic sessions at a yoga and ayurvedic centre and finally individual sessions with a yoga grandmaster. I will describe these settings to give the flavour and structure of the trip. I will conclude the report by looking at what I feel I received from the trip both professionally and personally, thus the report will end by pulling the different strands of the trip together and will address what did I actually bring back from India with me.

ASHRAM

My first stay was at the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Ashram in Neyyar Dam in Kerala. This is an Ashram that was set up by swami Sivananda in the foothills of Kerala's Sahyadri Mountains. The twelve-acre ashram is set in the middle of a lush jungle of Jackfruit, banana, rubber and mango trees.

My experience on the Ashram was initially difficult to say the least. On landing at the centre I had to stay in the foyer until I met with a member of the Ashram who would sign me in. I was given a long list of rules that I had to agree to. These included not eating onions, garlic or other stimulants. I had to agree to follow the structure of the day. The day was organised from 5.30am in the morning until 10.00pm at night and was structured as follows:

- 5.30am Wake up
- 6.00am Meditation, chanting and lecture
- 8.00am Asana and Pranayama
- 10.00am Break
- 11.00am Karma Yoga (work)
- 12.00noon Posture workshop
- 2.00pm Lecture
- 4.00pm Asanas and Pranayama
- 6.00pm Dinner
- 8.00pm Meditation, Chanting and talk
- 10.00pm Lights out

There was one day off a week and guests were not allowed to leave the Ashram without getting a pass. A security guard stood permanently at the entrance to make sure this was adhered to. My initial response to this was akin to feeling that I was signing myself into a prison or a convent! This was further reinforced by the sleeping arrangements.

There were several hundred people on the Ashram and accommodation was divided up into double rooms and a dormitory. I was in a dormitory with thirty other women. It was housed on a makeshift building grafted onto the roof. The beds were tiny with the dyed mosquito nets, the only visual decoration in the room. The dynamics of the group started with air conditioning fans. Some people wanted them on all night other people wanted them off. An Indian woman got up at around 3.00am to switch them on. I would get up at 4.30am to turn them off. As we had to get up at 5.30 a.m. there were times when this would drive me to distraction. I had expected to spend my time thinking about yoga not about negotiating my space at bedtime.

The actual yoga sessions at the Ashram took place between 8 - 10 a.m., 12.00 noon to 2.00 p.m. and 2.00 - 4.00 p.m. There also were several meditation sessions in the mornings and at night. Food was served in a huge dining room. We had to sit on the floor as food was served from buckets onto our plates. There were no knives and forks and food was eaten with the hands. The impact of the experience I will discuss later, but at the time I found the overall experience quite overwhelming and difficult. The food, the sleeping arrangements, the rhythm of the day, the climate, everything was different and it felt like I was both literally and metaphorically being turned upside down.

YOGA AND AYURAVEDA

After two weeks I left the Ashram to stay at Kalisam, a yoga and ayurvedic centre in Kovalam. I felt exhausted on leaving and was delighted to see that I was staying in a lively centre surrounded with tropical and medicinal plants. Kovalam beach was nearby. In the mornings people would gather on the beach at 5.30 a.m. to do Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) to the rising sun. The teacher at the centre trained in England with the British Wheel of Yoga. She moved to India to set up the centre with her husband Mohan who is an Indian ayurvedic practitioner. The classes here were much smaller than at the Ashram. It was also much more possible to look at specific areas of interest. I explained that I was looking to customise postures for adults who were anxious and agitated. Diana suggested postures, and hand mudras that could address this as well as specific breathe release techniques. The yoga taught at the centre was much less 'gung ho' than at Ashram. I also felt that it could more appropriately be transferred to my work setting. My postures and learning were helped considerably by Ayurvedic massage, in particular foot massage. Mohan would balance on a rope as he pummelled me from head to toe with his foot. They also use a technique called sidodhara where warm oil is poured continuously onto the forehead in order to soothe and quieten the mind.

Ayurvedic therapy asserts the importance of health. It proposes stages in the quest for good health, routine daily and sessional activities to prevent illness, purification and palliative therapy for disease, and stresses the importance of yoga, diet and massage in maintaining health. This was a particular highlight of the trip and I recommend anyone who travels to Kerala to have at least one ayurvedic massage!

GRANDMASTER

My final week was spent with a yoga grandmaster in Varkala in Kerala. Master Ramakrishna had studied for most of his life until middle age with various

teachers in the Himalayas. He learned under his master and was passing his knowledge on through individual group classes and training programmes. I had individual sessions and found these the most demanding classes of the trip. Master Ramakrishna would start sessions by synchronizing his breathing and almost going into a trance. His classes drew on kundalini yoga and worked with moving energy through the body by synchronizing movements with agni (fire) breathing. I was allowed to shout, make sounds and remember having to twirl around endlessly like a dervish. While these classes were both fascinating and fun, I felt they would be far too risky to duplicate in any work with mentally ill clients. However, at the end of my week when I asked Master Ramakrishna how he stayed so agile, he replied that he did yoga rigorously for six months every year. I asked what he did for the other 6 months, master replied, "I drink and I smoke and enjoy myself." I tentatively enquired if that was kundalini yoga. Master said, "it is my yoga and makes me happy, you must find your yoga and what makes you happy." Finding my own yoga and how I could adapt this for me was with clients in a mental health day centre seemed to be the focus of the trip. Consolidating all that I had seen and done into "my yoga", which I could use in my work, was the inevitable task of coming home and getting back into the daily routine.

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RETURN TO LONDON

My aim in going to India was to breathe life into my life and work, in particular to reflect and develop my work as a drama and movement therapist in South London. This is perhaps the major challenge of the trip. How does one develop one's practice and vision and integrate this into living in the real world? In writing this report I realise it is two months since my return. What exactly have I brought back from India?

GIFTS FROM INDIA

Initially I came back clear and inspired. The trip had been difficult but also a gift, it had given me time away to be 'still', challenged and to have everything including myself 'stood upside down'.

On returning I felt clear about wanting to change certain aspects of my work. Consequently, I have started to change certain areas of my work. In groups I now feel much more confident on focusing on breathing and breath work. This has not always been a smooth transition. In my first session back at work, I introduced some changes around breathing to the session. One member responded by saying "we don't usually do that, I prefer it the other way". In retrospect I think this maybe is to do with the fact that I had time to make changes whilst in India. My clients are slowly getting used to these changes since my return. I am also setting up several new groups, which I have advertised to Community Mental Health Teams in Wandsworth. These will work much more explicitly with techniques that I learnt in India. In this respect I can see new ideas and plans coming into my work since the trip. It has been invaluable in providing ideas, and alternative approaches. However the main change that has happened since the trip has been more subtle. My favourite memory of India is getting up early to do the sun salutations with the sunrise. I had never done these postures with actual sunlight before. The meaning of this sequence as a physical prayer to life struck me in the Indian sunrise. Breathing into these postures was an affirmation of life that has stayed with me, it helped confirm my own belief in what I was doing. I can offer people the space to concentrate on their breath in a quiet room. While this might not be vastly transformational, it is a vital link to life. Life is breath, slow cycles in and out, breathing, day turning into night, summer into winter. In India I had a chance to sit still for a while and listen to my own breathe. This experience has struck me in retrospect as touching something akin to T S Elliot's

"The still point of the turning world"

This experience, I think, has been the main gift I have brought back from India. Before I left, I felt burnt out and without inspiration. This experience enabled me to access a linking of body and breath that is quietly sustaining, ultimately the trip gave me a chance to get beyond the demands of daily life and to focus on breath, posture, stillness and the sources that can feed us. This has effected a subtle change in how I see things and must ultimately effect a change in how I do my work.