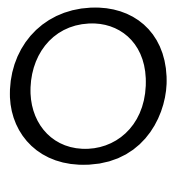


SKY OF LIGHT: CONVERSATIONS IN INDIA

by Denise Benitez



One week ago, I returned from my first trip to India. Even though I have taught and/or practiced yoga for over 35 years, I had never felt compelled to travel to India, the birthplace of this practice that I love so much. As my jet lag haze slowly clears, and I get my feet on the ground here in Seattle, there are two words that came back with me from India and sing to me constantly, even though I have left the dust cloaked streets of India behind: devotion and duty.

Devotion is present in India from the moment you walk off the plane and see the Tata trucks, which haul goods all over India, with Shiva tridents on their cabs, bells hanging from their bumpers, and paintings of gods and goddesses on their sides.

Devotion was present in the town we first visited, Dharamsala in northern India, home in exile of the Dalai Lama, and of many Tibetan refugees. Every morning, very early, I heard people walking by our hotel, chanting with their prayer beads, on the way to the Tibetan temple nearby. One old woman I particularly noticed, dressed in her lovely traditional Tibetan dress, and wearing the striped apron that indicated she was married. When I would go up later to the temple to meditate, I would see her already there, doing prostrations. At the temple, there are long boards of wood on the ground, specifically for this practice. The boards have grooves worn into them from the effects of so many years of hands sliding along the wood. This old Tibetan woman would be doing her prostrations, bowing to the floor, sliding on her belly until she was face down on the wood board with her arms overhead, and then pushing herself back up to standing. All the while, she would be chanting in a low monotone. Her chant became the accompaniment to my daily meditations, and I marveled at the depth of her devotion.

At the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala, where a group of us worked with Tibetan children, there is a large banner on the playing field that says, "Others Before Self." The children constantly mention their duty to their parents, the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan people, their studies, their friends. While walking up the side of a mountain with a young Tibetan girl I met, she suddenly stood stock still, and gazed down at the playing field below, where the school band was practicing. When I called her name, she did not respond, and I thought for a moment that she was having a mini-seizure. When the song ended, she looked at me and said, "Tibetan national anthem." I won't project on these Tibetan children and pretend that they don't want cell phones, computers, cameras, or that they don't go on the Barbie sites when they surf the net. Yet, they had a mature, wise beyond their years (American years, anyway), attitude toward their duties to others. One said, "I want to learn to cook, so I can take care of my parents as they age." Another said, "I want to study, so I can lift up the Tibetan people."

Duty became a word that was reinforced wherever I went. After Dharamsala, we traveled mostly in the state of Rajasthan, a mixed Hindu/Muslim state. Our Hindu driver, Vishnu, who was actually Nepalese, got up every morning to do his puja (prayer rituals), even if he had been working until the early morning hours. Another Hindu man we met, Sanjay, told us about his love for Krishna, and took us to a hauntingly beautiful Krishna temple outside Jaipur. In the golden sunset light, I asked him what he loved about Krishna, and he said, "He's a trickster, a rascal!" and laughed. He told me of his hour long pujas every morning, and of his arranged marriage. "My parents and her parents got together, and I met her, and I said, okay." I asked him how he would feel about his wife working, and he said, "She would only have to work if I wasn't doing my duty to take care of her." His wife, who we met, covered her face with her sari out of respect, Sanjay said, "for him, his mother, and older males." His wife wears a sari, certain jewelry, and a red stripe down the part of her hair, to designate that she is married.

Even "modern" Hindus who have turned away from the rituals and practices of puja seem to have nonetheless placed their devotion toward a practice. I met a woman who thought the practices of Hinduism were archaic, and she had turned to Vipassana meditation; she meditates one hour in the morning and one hour at night. "You have to watch your own mind to evolve in this life," she told me. And another man, who owns what he says is India's only eco-lodge, told me that the pujas belonged to his mother's generation, but that he "tried to live the principles of Hinduism; respect for the earth and all living things." He got tears in his eyes as he tried to express to me what this meant to him, and finally said, "I don't know how to say it. It is so important to me."

I will not forget the wife I met in the small town of Nawalgarh, Rajasthan, who worked from morning to night, helping her husband run their guesthouse. Dressed in a different lovely sari every day, she made all the meals for guests, washed the sheets and towels, cleaned the rooms, laughed often. Since Rajasthan has been experiencing drought conditions for over 10 years, she and her husband have made a commitment to using minimal water and electricity. She washes her plentiful dishes, pots and pans while squatting on the floor (her lovely feet, with silver ankle bracelets shining), using a small bowl of soapy water. She washes her towels

and sheets the same way. She walks into a small puja closet in between tasks, offers ghee (clarified butter) and water to the gods, and continues her day.

Devotion in India seems like breathing; integral, ever present, natural. And, India is a complex place, full of paradoxes that stun and sometimes offend. Yet, with all its contradictions, India washes over a person, changing you forever. You stand at an old fort in the sunset, looking over a city of two million, you see the Hindu temples shining in the light, and then you hear the Muslim call to prayer from the loudspeakers around the city. "Allah! Allah!" they shout four times a day. You feel that you could see Jesus, or Buddha walk around the next corner, and you wouldn't be surprised. You feel it is natural to yearn for communion with spirit, devotion, and duty, a word that has come to represent for me now a reassuring sense of peace in what is. You understand that there is no better use of a life than seeking this communion, as people have for millenia.