

THE YOGA SOCIETY

by Paul J. Wigowsky

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This short story features my introduction to a yoga guru named Cliff Keohane, who lived at a place known historically as Cole Station, near Diamond Springs, California. The station was used in the previous century as a pony express station.

<https://nationalponyexpress.org/historic-pony-express-trail/stations/>

He was standing there, straight and tall. He wore blue jeans and a blue shirt. His black hair sloped over his forehead and under his ears; it was laid flat as if pressed down by a cap. His face was bronze with a tan-look, and his scintillating eyes peered out of deep sockets under heavy eyebrows. His cheekbones formed a bumpy surface on the sides of a straight nose. His mouth was pressed firmly against solid white teeth. His chin slid into a curvy proportion under the concave incline directly below the lower lip. His ears stood erect and distinctly open for any sound.

This was Cliff Keohane, the guru my friend Boris was telling me about. Boris opened the iron gate latched into place by a hook contraption, and I followed him up the cemented path around the brown, wooden house and into the one-and-a-half acre field where we stood facing a man digging a channel for a pipe line.

“Hello, Cliff,” said Boris, stretching out his hand.

“Boris, what brings you here?” Cliff said, extending his hand.

“Just visiting,” answered Boris. “I brought a friend with me. His name is Paul.”

“Glad to meet you,” I said and reached out to shake a strong and sturdy hand.

“You’ve come around to your annual meeting again, I notice,” remarked Cliff, looking at Boris.

“It was about time for me to visit you,” said Boris. This was the second time Boris was visiting Cliff at the Yoga farm, as he called it. In the previous two years, Boris had visited the new-found guru in Santa Cruz, where Cliff had a small place for Yoga students.

“I said to myself, this is about the time of the year that Boris shows up,” said Cliff.

“The urge comes to me just about this time of the year when the trees start blossoming and nature stares me right in my face,” responded Boris.

“What’s happening up in your area of the world?” asked Cliff.

“I went to visit the hippies in San Francisco several days ago,” replied Boris. “They’re quite a generation.”

“I’ve been hearing plenty about them around here,” stated Cliff. “Ever so often we get a few hippie visitors, but they’re never around too long. They want a world of peace, contentment, and love, while the rest of the world is supposed to wait on them. They expect food and shelter to come from heaven.”

“I noticed they are very friendly, though,” remarked Boris. “I was walking down the street and here comes a fellow selling something called the ‘Oracle’ – quite an artistic piece of work – and so we started talking about religion, God, etcetera. They’ve got interesting views. I even saw several of them talking with ministers and trying to convert them.”

“What do you think about their taking marijuana and LSD?” I asked, trying to get into the conversation.

“Instant samadhi (spiritual ecstasy) is what they call it,” answered Cliff. “There was this one fellow who was on an LSD trip and he was stopped by a policeman. When the police asked him what his name was, he said, ‘I’m God; no, you’re God.’”

We laughed while Cliff continued working in the dirt and talking at the same time, occasionally looking up at us with his penetrating eyes.

“I’m going to show Paul around this place,” said Boris.

Cliff didn’t say anything as Boris and I walked around on the yoga farm. Boris showed me the chicken pen, the goats, the rabbits, the apple trees, the walnut trees, the pear trees, and the fenced-in vegetable patch.

We came back later and helped Cliff shovel dirt into the channel after the water pipe was laid in it. I asked Cliff several questions while we worked.

“What is the purpose of yoga?” I began.

“To know the truth, to see yourself as you are,” answered Cliff succinctly.

“How old were you when you began studying it?” I continued.

“Eighteen,” said Cliff.

“And how long did it take to reach the goal,” I inquired.

“You never stop learning,” stated Cliff.

“I mean as far as reaching samadhi,” I rephrased.

“That’s only the first stage of yoga, and it usually takes about seven years to reach,” explained Cliff.

“You mean there’s something beyond that?” I asked with a puzzled look on my face.

“Sure there is,” said Cliff, smiling to himself at my naivete. “There’s enlightenment and even things beyond that which – I don’t want to be snobbish – I don’t want to talk about that because you wouldn’t understand it.”

“How long does enlightenment take?” I asked after recovering from the previous remark that seemed to penetrate into my soul.

“Twenty years,” replied Cliff. He was 40 years old.

“Wow,” I exclaimed. “Are you enlightened?”

“Yes,” Cliff responded curtly.

The limit of my questions was over. I stood thinking about what it meant to be enlightened. Here was a man that I took at his word, and I believed that he could show me the truths of life that I was searching for.

Later on that afternoon, Boris and I took a trip through the nearby woods, observing the tall redwood trees, listening to the birds chirping, and talking about life, its purpose and what should be done in life. Boris was eager to get away from the monotony of city life and from the vain pursuits which were stimulated through purposeless education. Yet he felt there were certain responsibilities that he couldn’t force himself to break. One boundary was his parents – he felt that he owed them a life, that he should help them in their necessities, and that he should make them feel proud of their son. Boris was twenty-five years old. He had studied so many things – drafting, theology, philosophy, dentistry, literature – that he no longer knew what he wanted to do with his life. He knew that he hated being restricted to a mechanical, “punch-in-and-punch-out” existence. He knew that he wouldn’t be happy unless he found out the truth about who he was and what he was doing here. Yet he also knew that he could psych himself into accepting a normal life, going to work five days a week, getting married, and associating with a society that was indulging in ignorance and prejudice.

I couldn’t say that I was any better off. I also had a desire to drop out of civilized life and to dwell amongst nature. Except I had no psychological restrictions or responsibilities that Boris felt he had. My relationship with my parents was not as close as his was. I was more of a rebel at home, wanting to impose my own rules. I was also sick and tired of school and colleges, thinking that education was not practical enough for me. Whereas education loaded the mind with theories and facts, it never showed the person how to live life – that is pragmatically – and it seemed as if the educational system took it for granted that a human being would learn how to live from his parents or else simply from his environment. But, after all, they may be right; I may be the only guy who hasn’t learned how to live, at least with a tangible purpose in mind.

Yet I wanted to learn – anything and everything. So when Boris and I returned from the refreshing walk through nature’s quiet repose, I asked Cliff to explain several questions that were whirling in my mind.

“Is there an entity that exists in this world, say a God, according to the Christian tradition?” I asked.

“If you mean the kind of God who is separate from existence and reality, no,” answered Cliff.

“Then who or what is God?” I inquired.

“You are thinking in linear terms and it’s hard for me to answer that questions because God is different from anything that you think,” postulated Cliff.

“What is he?” I asked.

“What you mean to be God is what I mean to be all reality,” explained Cliff.

“You mean God is everything?” I asked.

“That’s about the closest you can get,” replied Cliff. “It can be called pantheism if you like.”

“Then how does evil, or let’s say the devil, exist?” I inquired.

“You’re thinking along Christian lines,” corrected Cliff. “Your definition of the devil would probably be my definition of ignorance. That is what I believe is the greatest evil in the world. When you have seen the truth, the devil or ignorance no longer exists for you.”

“Hmm,” I murmured. “That’s interesting.”

What I had so far observed and learned from the yoga guru was interesting, amusing, and impressive. Nevertheless, from the moment I saw him, I had expected him to do or to say something beyond the ordinary – let me say, something supernatural. However, I was willing and eager to take a new step in life, and studying to be a yogi seemed to me at the moment the greatest and the most spiritually profitable thing in life that I could do.

I had made up my mind to come and live at Cliff’s yoga farm, known historically as Cole Station, and I revealed that to Boris after we left the farm that night after a sumptuous meal. Boris sort of doubted that I would go, but he remarked that he wished he was in my shoes.

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Three weeks after that visit to Cliff’s 2,500 feet in elevation farm, school was over and I returned, having made up my mind to live there. How long, I wasn’t sure; but I was

pretty sure it would at least be for the summer. I had left my home in Burlingame, California, without telling my parents where I was going. I knew that Boris would tell them where I was if they inquired about my whereabouts.

The farm dogs, Lady and King, met me at the gate when I opened it and walked up the cemented path and around to the back yard. I was glad to have finally made it. I was worried that perhaps my 1956 Chevy station wagon would break down during the 200 mile ride, half of it through sinuous mountain roads. I had also by-passed Cole Station unconsciously – quite unbelievable to me because I had not lost my way through about five different turn-offs – and had to return several miles to rediscover it. As I walked into the back yard, Cliff walked out on the porch.

“Hi, I’m back,” I said.

“I saw you coming up the road,” Cliff replied.

“These dogs are too much,” I remarked as Lady kept jumping at me.

“She’s very friendly,” Cliff continued, walking with a pail in his hand toward the chicken pen without saying another word, except, “There’s some coffee inside.” I wondered if it was the same coffee from the bag that Boris had brought as a gift.

I stood there thinking about his first remark while the female dog kept pulling at my sleeve. What did he mean that he saw me? Could it be that he was referring to some clairvoyant vision or could it be that he just happened to notice my car as I pulled in front of his house? I wasn’t sure which it was.

I walked into the house and asked Cliff’s wife, Jeannette, if there was any coffee available. I exchanged a few words with the lady from Georgia that Cliff had married. I finished drinking the black coffee and then I walked outside to interact with my new-found guru. Cliff was busy working, feeding the animals and doing other farm chores, so I decided to walk around on the small farm and refresh my memory. I thought that it would be best to arrange things with Cliff as soon as possible. When I heard him banging on some aluminum in the tool shed, I saw my opportunity. I stuck my head through the open window and watched, hoping that eventually I might gain his attention somehow. He looked over and saw me.

“Well, what brings you here?” inquired Cliff pointedly, glancing momentarily at me.

“Well, I’ve decided to study yoga, so I thought I’d come here and see what the possibilities are,” I said, carefully choosing the right words to say.

“You know there are certain responsibilities around here,” cautioned Cliff.

“Well, I was thinking that I could do some work or anything that was available,” I replied. I was stumbling over the words.

“There’s the lumber yard you could work at,” advised Cliff.

“How about farm work?” I asked.

“You mean here or elsewhere?” asked Cliff.

“Well, anywhere, if possible,” I replied.

“There’s no work available at other places, and the work here I can do just as well by myself,” explained Cliff.

“Hmm,” I wondered. “I guess I can check at the lumber yard.”

“How about the first month?” asked Cliff matter-of-factly. “You wouldn’t get paid there for a month. You know we have to get food for everybody here, and I can’t say to my wife that God will provide.”

“Well, how much do you charge?” I negotiated.

“I think it’s something like a hundred dollars a month,” said Cliff. “I’ll check later with my wife. She handles the money.”

“I think I can manage it,” I reasoned. “I have over \$300 in the bank, so I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

“OK,” said Cliff. “I think we can give you the room upstairs. Let’s go see.”

I followed him into the house and up the narrow stairs into the attic where there was a large room for two – separated from the rest of the attic which was used for junk and for hanging clothes. He sat on the bed and asked me several questions.

“Why are you interest in yoga?” he began.

“I want to learn the meaning of life, to find God, to know ultimate reality,” I replied. “I feel that’s the most important thing in life.”

“What makes you feel that you can get all that through yoga?” inquired Cliff.

“I’ve read a lot about it,” I answered. “I’m not just going into this haphazardly. I can say one thing: I’m dissatisfied with money and the trivial things of life, and I want to get at the basic truth. And as far as I know, I believe yoga can do that for me. Actually, what I’m saying is that I want to know the absolute truth.”

“I think you’re heading in the right direction,” said Cliff in a fatherly way, “but you should know that there are physical as well as spiritual truths. In the physical world, there are such absolute truths as, no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. I may want to put my hand through the door, but the physical laws prevent me from doing that. If it wasn’t for such laws, there would be a bunch of maniacs running around creating chaos.”

“What about spiritual absolutes?” I asked. “Could you give me an example of that?”

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,” responded Cliff. “This absolute applies to something like if you do something wrong, guilt feelings will punish you. On the other hand, truth or good deeds will rebound with good. It works on the principle of cause and effect: for every action there is an equal and an opposite reaction. One way or another, if you do something wrong, you will suffer for it. Some call it the law of karma. I’m not threatening you. It’s just one of the spiritual absolutes.”

Cliff didn’t talk more about spiritual or idealistic matters, but turned immediately to material things. He inquired about the money, and I told him I could make it available anytime, only that I needed to withdraw the money from a bank. He told me his wife would be going into town that day, so I could go with her. In the meantime, he told me I could bring my stuff upstairs and arrange it any way I liked.

Al, another yogi student, was outside during this time, so Cliff told him to help me bring in my appurtenances. Al was of medium height and had curly hair and an orange-brown mustache.

“You’re the guy who came with Boris last time, aren’t you?” asked Al as we walked towards my car.

“Yeh,” I responded. “By the way, Boris got drafted. The FBI came to question him a couple of days ago.”

“You kidding,” said Al quizzically.

“No,” I reassured him. “It was a surprise for me, too. He didn’t tell a single soul except his parents.”

“Why did the FBI come to question him?” asked Al.

“Oh, he was in trouble with them previously for not answering an induction notice,” I answered. “But he talked with them and somehow – either setting up an excuse of a bad back or a weak heart – he got out of it. But they finally got wise to him, I guess. So now they got him.”

“That’s too bad,” said Al, laughing to himself.

The books and clothes were carried upstairs. I looked through some books that probably belonged to Cliff, and I took down a book on yoga from the shelf and sat down to read it, having nothing better to do at the time. It was dinner time before I got half way through the book, and I answered the call to dinner by going downstairs to the dining room. Two other yoga students were seated around the table. They were both girls, one named Linda, about 15 years old, and the other named Jeannie, about 19 years old. Al, who was probably around 22 years old, was at work. He had a night shift at the lumber mill.

Two children also sat at the table, both boys, ages about five and three. Cliff occupied the head seat and joked with the girls about some former yoga student who had

recently left and who was also Jeannie's boyfriend, supposedly. They had their own small talk, and I felt that their chatter was beyond my knowledge, so I silently ate my dinner. I observed that Cliff liked to joke around and throw short aphorisms into his talking, like "that's the way the world is," and "some people are too crazy to know that's going on," and "are you hip to that," and so forth.

I said hardly more than half-a-dozen unnoticed words, and I smiled and laughed at some of the things that were said. I guess one of the things about me was that I didn't speak unless I was spoken to. After dinner, I thanked Jeannette for the good chicken dinner, and I went back upstairs to finish my book, thinking that there was nothing better to do at the time, and getting a hazy idea that I was impertinent. However, I didn't want that to bother me.

The next morning after breakfast, I asked Cliff if I could take the dogs with me hiking in the mountains. He gave me permission to do so. I should mention that I tried to converse with Cliff during breakfast. I was reading about the moon probe on Time magazine and I asked him what his opinion was about man reaching the moon and other planets. He said, "Sure, they will." I asked him what he based his opinion on. He said, "On science fiction comics that I read thirty years ago." After that sarcastic remark, I didn't venture to continue the subject, seeing that he wasn't in any sense serious about it, or even eager to talk about it. So I went to the mountains with the dogs who were splendid company.

We hiked all the way to a nearby river; they seemed to have a spirit of comradeship in them, sometimes following close behind and sometimes leading the way. At the river King accidentally fell into the water, and when I helped him out of the water, he stood close by until I also was out of danger. It was a long hike, and when we returned it was almost dinner time.

The same thing happened again during dinner, and after I ate my dinner I again left for my room. Downstairs I could hear loud talking and even louder laughter. It was about an hour later when I heard Cliff calling me to come downstairs.

I put on my shoes and went downstairs. I saw everyone sitting around the table, so I walked over to an empty chair and sat down.

"Somebody called me?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Yes," said Cliff. "We want to talk to you about some things that might concern you."

"Go right ahead," I remarked. "My ears are all for listening." Everyone laughed for what seemed to be no reason at all except for laughter's sake.

"We're going to straighten you out," said Cliff bluntly.

"Sure, I need some of that stuff," I replied. Laughter again.



“I think some of your premises about this place are wrong,” said Cliff, taking on the aura of a yoga instructor.

“Could be,” I said shyly. “I’m not sure myself about this place. It’s enshrouded in a mysterious cloud for me.”

“You want some beer?” asked Jeannie politely.

“Sure,” I answered. I poured some beer into my mouth, waiting for Cliff to make his next statement.

“You’re a peculiar guy,” proceeded Cliff. “We haven’t had a guy like you for quite a while.”

“I’m just trying to play my part in the game,” I said defensively. “You know, like moving my chess piece on the board.”

“As I say, your premises are probably wrong,” reiterated Cliff.

“What are my premises?” I asked in a contrary tone.

“You probably think that this is a free-love colony,” postulated Cliff.

“Oh, not at all,” I responded quickly. “I’ve had my share of that.”

The subject went from sex, to beer, to many other things, but the purpose of the conversation seemed to me pure entertainment. Something had to be done so as not to have things around the house boring, and conversation, beer, and laughter could serve that purpose. I played the game, at least I tried to, but I knew down deep inside – somewhere in my entrails – that I didn’t care too much for it.

“I tried to get away from society,” I remarked, “but I guess it just can’t be done.”

The principle ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’ applied to my condition. I even stayed up to watch the late show on tv to seem interested and involved. I was beginning to think that I wasn’t getting any yoga instruction at all. There were no hatha yoga exercises, and no expository teachings. It was basically “Know thyself.” And it was done by observing your thoughts, emotions, and interactions with others as you went through farm chores and basic daily life moments.

The next day, Sunday, wasn’t any different. It wasn’t a day of rest as I supposed it to be. Everyone still did their share of the work around the Yoga farm. I wanted to walk to another nearby river, but when I asked Cliff if I could take the dogs with me to the river, he stated that the girls took the dogs there before and they almost drowned because of the slippery rocks there. The negative attitude made me not persist in the issue, so I went solitary.

## POSTSCRIPT

That was the end of the short story I wrote in 1967 after my first year at the Yoga farm. I was drawn to the place for the next two years, but I didn't write about that.

Now – years later – as I reminisce about that period of time in my life, I recall some important lessons that I learned about myself. First of all, I learned that yoga was not just about doing exercises, like pranās and breathing exercises; it was more about self-discovery, looking inward and evaluating how and why everything is caused by previous thoughts and feelings. It was like a psychological exercise in self-evaluation at times, and at other times a critical analysis of one's own character. Secondly, I started to value the moments when Cliff would spout some aphorism that was directed at a certain part of my soul to make me aware of a valuable life lesson or truism: "You must love Truth more than Life."

The second year was kind of interesting in that I was living for the first time in an environment where a couple of lesbians came to the farm. It was quite an experience when Jeannie walked into their room by accident and discovered them making love. That turned out to be a teachable moment for Cliff. He gathered us around the table and talked about the fantasies we create in our minds and the role-playing that develops from those fantasies. I found out that Cliff was not being judgmental at all; he was just trying to use a yoga technique of seeing the whole picture as it pertained to human experience.

The third year (and my last) was when during the summer of 1969 all hell broke loose. It was when I introduced Boris's brother Oleg to the yoga guru. It was a one day trip with a few friends who wanted to know about the Yoga farm, and we were stoned out of our minds. Cliff knew that. He had a policy of not allowing drugs on the farm because he did not want to get in trouble with the law. I remember sitting on a slope beside a small cabin with my friends, and Cliff came to talk to us. In our minds, he seemed to be a guru who was ready to give us a "Sermon on the Mount" speech. On the contrary, he just sat near us and just chatted about ordinary stuff, nothing earth-shattering or overly spiritual.

The last time I visited the Yoga farm was in the 1980's when I drove there with my wife and her sisters – on our way to Lake Tahoe. I wanted to pay one last visit to a place that was like a stepping-stone in my life. I also wanted to see if Cliff was still there. I had many dreams and sightings (I call them transfigurations, like seeing his face on another person's face) of him. We stopped at the gate to the Yoga farm and I walked up to the gate to peer inside. Nobody was around. It was all run down. The gate was locked.

My story ends here. I tried years later to google Cliff Keohane's name, but I couldn't find it anywhere. I heard that he might have moved back to Santa Cruz, where he started his yoga studio in the early 1960s. But I could not find any trace of him anywhere. Nevertheless, he still lives on in my memory, and I will always remember him as my first yoga guru.

Later on, I would be introduced to another guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, who would lead me as a spiritual teacher to the higher levels of the science of yoga: Kriya Yoga.



[Note: I couldn't find a photo of the house known as Cole Station where Cliff had his Yoga farm. However, I did find a house that looked similar -- architecturally. I am posting that house as a reference point to a place that is etched in my mind.]

