

Chapter 4

I was now one with the river. I had entered the stream, immersed myself in it, and swam several strokes away from the shore. I felt a new-found freedom, as if the burdens of life had been lifted. I floated on my back awhile, savoring the buoyancy and the lightness of spirit. It was as if I had been released from the physical body and was floating on air.



As I returned to the west bank of the river, I heard a man -- who had previously been chanting and praying -- suddenly erupt into laughter. The “Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha” of the Hatha Yoga he was practicing was infectious, and I started laughing with him, “Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha.” All the tension was being released from the body, clearing the lungs of inner congestion. All inner impurities were being expelled.

When I finally returned to the side of the boat, I asked for a match to light the candle that was part of the diya (light and flower offering) that I had bought as a ritual gift for Ma Ganga. I held the leaf bowl in my hand as the candle was lit, then I gently placed the diya with marigold flowers and candlelight on the surface of the water. I pushed the leaf bowl away from the shore, trying to make it enter the downstream current of the river. The flowing movement of the river embraced the offering of devotion and carried it slowly on the long journey to the sea.



I returned to the ghat, stepped on the stone stairway, and got into the boat.

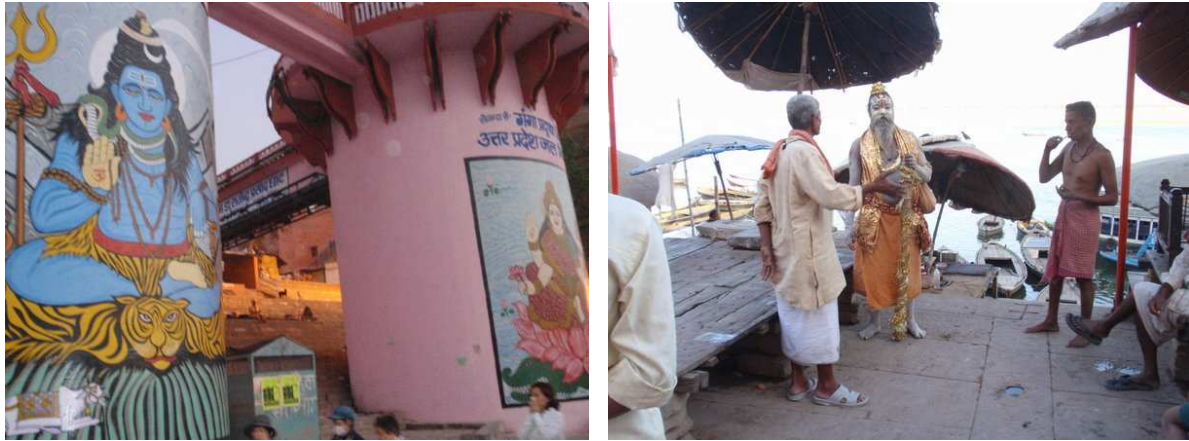
“I feel like a new man, now!” I exclaimed as I put my dry shirt back on.

I was exhilarated from the experience. My mind entered a joyous silence. The boatman rowed the boat in the other direction, going upstream to the other cremation spot, the Manikarnika Ghat. Another boat of tourists was heading in the same direction. The people in that boat were astonished to see that I had bathed in the Ganges. “It felt good,” I told them with a smile as we passed their boat. I was consciously aware of the implication behind the ritual bath – Hindu scriptures advised adherents of the faith to prepare the soul for its final journey to liberation (Moksha) by bathing in the sacred river.

Ahead was the cremation area where funeral pyres burned the dead bodies day and night. There was a body inside the burning stacked pile of wooden logs, and another body wrapped in shrouds on a bier awaited its turn to be consumed by the fire and returned to the elements of the earth, from which it was created. ‘Dust to dust, ashes to ashes’ – but the spirit soared into the heavens on the wings of everlasting life.



The boatman turned around and rowed past the Mir Ghat, the Tripura Bhairavi Ghat, and the Man Mandir Ghat. We were back at the place where we began our journey on the Ganges – Dashashwamedh Ghat. We stepped out of the boat and walked up the ghat (stairway). I looked closely at the painting of Shiva on a blue-colored pillar. I had seen it from a distance when we were out on the river, but now I was able to see the meditative blue-skinned Shiva sitting in the lotus position on a tiger skin with his right palm lifted in the mudra of blessing and his trident standing upright at his right shoulder. The Ganges River flowed from the top of his head.



Our guide Ravi led us past the platform where priests and sadhus mingled with devotees of the river. One sadhu looked directly at me as I passed by. I stopped to look at him and saw that his forehead had the markings of a Shiva follower, and his orange robe and long beard were signs that he had been immersed in the wisdom of Shiva for many years. I raised my camera to take a picture of him. I had captured a moment in time of India's sacred heritage. And the bare-footed sadhu with a long club in his left hand had captured my attention with a holy darshan (spiritual sighting). I smiled at him and moved my mouth in recognition of his divine nature by softly voicing, "Namaste."

I caught up with Ravi and Ben, who had walked on ahead without noticing that I had stopped to have a moment-in-time communion of souls meeting at a sacred site. Ravi was telling Ben about the next holy place.

"We're going to see the Vishwanath Temple," said Ravi, who was striding slowly towards a small, narrow alley. "There's no cameras allowed near the temple, so we'll leave your cameras at my friend's Masala tea shop."

We walked through a tight security place. The golden top of the temple dedicated to Shiva glistened in the light of the morning sun.

"The Hindu people who bathe in the Ganges come here for their blessing from Shiva," said Ravi as he stood in a doorway about 50 meters across from the Vishwanath Temple. He pointed at the visible crown of the temple. "There's about 750 kilograms (or 1,654 pounds) of gold plating on the temple spire."

"Can I go inside the temple since I bathed in the Ganges River?" I asked, wanting to be included in the number of the privileged few.

"You have to be a Hindu to go inside," Ravi said.

"What about my past life as a Hindu, does that count?" I asked in a serious tone.

Ravi looked at me and seemed to want to say, 'Are you kidding?' But instead he simply responded, "No."

Ravi reassured me that I'd get to see a Vishwanath Temple. "There's a replica of the same temple at the Banares Hindu University," he said. "The temple was

planned by the nationalist Madan Malaviya and financed by the wealthy industrialists, the Birlas.”



I had heard the name of Birla several times now. The Birla House was where Gandhi was immortalized. And the Laxmi Narayan Temple was built by the Birla family. Their contributions to Hindu culture and religion were widespread throughout the country.

When we walked past the Shrapal (guardians) of the temple – and past the sacred bull Nandi, which faced the temple and symbolized the yearning of the human soul for oneness with Paramatma (the Supreme Soul) – we took off our shoes and entered the abode of Shiva, the Lord of the universe. Inside the sanctum sanctorum was the Shiva lingam – the supreme symbol of Shiva as the deity who brought about the dissolution of the old in order to bring into manifestation the new. The Shiva lingam was a round pillar-shaped black stone resting in the center of a circular-shaped plate with an extension for the water to flow out. The pillar and the circle represented the combined energies of the masculine and feminine principles of the universe. Creation was an act that required the male and the female. I looked up and saw a rope hanging from the ceiling and water was flowing along the rope and dripping on the flower-covered rounded head of the pillar. The water represented the divine waters of the heaven-borne Ganges fecundating the male-female Shiva lingam and bringing new life to the fields, the creatures of earth, and to all of existence.



“And that concludes our tour for today,” said Ravi as we left the temple dedicated to Shiva. “Tomorrow we’ll go to Sarnath, and I’ll tell you all about the Buddha and his teachings.”

The driver dropped us off at the Meraden Grand Hotel. The rest of the day was ours to do with as we pleased. I had noticed a Christian church near our hotel, and I suggested to Ben that we should take a look at it. So we walked down the street to the church, which happened to be a Catholic Marian church named St. Mary’s Cathedral. The large wooden doors at the church entrance depicted the twelve apostles with their distinct symbols (i.e. Peter with the Keys to the Kingdom, Paul with the Book of Life and the Sword of Wisdom, etc.). Inside the church, above the entrance, was a fascinating painting of a bearded and long-haired Jesus sitting in the lotus position on a green surface. The orange robe signified he was a sadhu (holy man), and the solar halo against a blue background signified his divine nature. His right hand was raised to his chest in the Abhaya mudra, saying in hand language, “Be not afraid.” This was Jesus the Yogi, who had traveled to India during the missing years of the biblical account. My encounter with the iconic representation of Jesus in that cathedral was similar to the darshan (encounter of a spiritual nature with divine personages) that I had experienced with the murtis (holy idols) in Hindu temples.



I don't know if Ben noticed the pictorial depiction of Jesus as a Yogi. After I took the picture with my digital camera, I turned around and saw him heading for the altar, where a statue of the La Pieta – Mother Mary holding her crucified son Jesus in her arms – was enshrined. My intuition told me that it would not be wise to tell him the story of Jesus in India. It would make our fragile relationship deteriorate even further. I didn't want that to happen.

When we came out of the cathedral, a young rickshaw driver, who had followed us from the hotel, accosted us and offered to take us anywhere we desired. I wanted to go to the Ganges River again, to reflect on the morning boat ride and the immersion in the mystical waters. Ben agreed to go for a ride since there was nothing else for us to do in the evening. And according to the rickshaw driver, it was too far to walk – six kilometers!

Along the way we encountered a world teeming with humanity – and cows. The traffic was dense, and the air was suffocating. It was a totally different experience than the morning ride in an air-conditioned vehicle. Ben and I both felt the need to cover our noses with our handkerchiefs. We were not used to such a vast variety of smells – cow dung, human urine, car fumes, food cooking, cremation smoke from the river, incense offered to the gods – it was a real smorgasbord of olfactory sensations. Certain roads were closed off to traffic, so Salam Udin, a Muslim, pedaled his bicycle-rickshaw through narrow side alleys and byways to get us as close to the river as he could. Eventually, he parked his rickshaw in a parking lot about 200 meters from the river. Salam's friend at the parking lot said he'd take us to the river. It turned out that Salam's friend wanted to make some money out of us by showing us his family's textile shop afterwards.



Nevertheless, we were taken to the river. We sat down and rested near the pillar of Shiva, the same place we had entered the river for the boat ride in the morning. We watched boys playing cricket, monkeys climbing the walls, and a few boats on the river. It was not as exciting as in the morning.

I reflected on what had transpired in my life after I entered the stream of the sacred waters: a total identification with India's history and tradition, and an immersion in its most sacred ritual of bathing in the legendary Ganga. I had come to the City of Light – Kashi – also known as Benares, and presently called Varanasi. The transformation of my consciousness was complete – I had arrived at the center!

The American writer Mark Twain, during his trip to India in 1896, wrote in his travelogue: “Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.” [Following the Equator, A Journey Around the World, Chapter 50]