This book had several speculative titles before I held to the original title ‘Road to Salvation’, which is also the name given to the series of blog posts written across the journey I made to Muktinath in Nepal at the beginning of October 2021. The Pilgrimage journey and all it represents is just that, as it is a pathway to connect you at its culmination with the Higher Self.

T h e R o a d t o S a l v a t i o n

by

Elizabeth Currie

“When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable. I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and thus I am blessed – let this be my parting word. In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play and here I have caught sight of him that is formless. My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch; and if the end comes here, let it come – let this be my parting word”[1].

[1] Rabindranath Tagore. Gitanjali. 96

This book is dedicated to the memory of the village and villagers of the Himalayan town of Dharali, Uttarakhand, pilgrimage stop over for pilgrims travelling to and from Gangotri. It was destroyed by a massive landslide on the 5th August 2025. I will always remember it as being my special place, and epicentre of some of my most sublime pilgrimage experiences.

PROLOGUE

The Ultimate Quest

This is a tale of ambition, unlikely as that sounds for a story about a spiritual journey. It's a tale that started way back in my earlier life as I worked my way through the early years of studies and then work in the world, of having a family, of doing many of the sorts of things that most of us relate to as being a 'normal' life: the quotidian rhythms of day and year; the days of summer, of holidays, of house work or gardening, of shopping, parties or nights out in bars, of Christmases, of bleary eyed new years counting the costs of the latest festive season. From starting out as a teenager going to university to become an archaeologist, continuing that into an adulthood pursuing higher academic achievements, of developing a range of potentialities from intellectual to creative, a common current flowing deeply in my psyche covertly sought something else and would only ever stay with the different people, places, projects and pursuits of each life stage as long as they met its secret objectives. Through long years of working on different university projects, of striking off to the distant tropical lands of Ecuador to be the intrepid archaeologist I styled myself as being during that time – machete strapped to side, earning nicknames from local people as 'mad woman of the mangroves' – something far deeper and mystical was calling me, having its way with me, developing propensities, potencies, and powers that would be needed at a far later stage, when its real purpose and intent for me was revealed.

As I worked through the different stages of my life course, this secret purpose allowed itself to be contained, Trojan horse style perhaps, in some exterior worldly ambition or activity to call to me to strive for it. Much as a caterpillar eats its way through so many leaves, periodically marking each new growth stage by discarding its old skin into one beneath more commodious before embarking upon the next growth stage, so I worked my way through my life until it became clear that there was nothing whatever in the world itself that could ever hold my interest for long. I would pine for that 'something' that ever glittered and beckoned from a distance, never worldly in any way.

Because the one thing that became clear to me quite early on was that I would never be, could never be satisfied with anything less than the absolute best; and beyond that if such a possibility existed. And that could never be something attained in mere worldly terms: something that might shower you with accolades one moment only to strip them away the next. What I yearned for lay way beyond this, because even then I was distantly conscious that 'best' in worldly terms was something constructed; it wasn't actually anything 'real' at all. In the context of the profound spiritual awakening experience I had had in my early forties[2], this all eventually, inevitably, became contained in and expressed by that most elusive and disputable concept of all: 'God'. But by then I had had my Awakening[3] and direct experience of It (understood and referred to here as the Self[4]) and, from many years of stark atheism, had already turned back to start seeking It in different ways: firstly through the Christian religion of my childhood, then in other ways. But none were ever able to hold me for long. Christianity apart, I was always taken with and guided by the famous sayings of Jesus, which ever made sense to my deeper self. The actual religion itself quickly alienated me however and I recall the last time I ever went to a church service – midnight mass – when the whole pantomime with the officiating Evangelist preacher left me with the certain conviction I would never return. It was like trying to put an ocean into a milk bottle: that experience of the transcendent limitless perfection into something small, defined, and always subject to the interpretation of some flawed human being, often themselves simply 'going through the motions'. As risky as it may have been or seemed to conventional believers, or arrogant even to be determined to pursue my own way, I knew it was what I was being called to do. Much later, as my Pilgrimage worked its way through its own distinctive phases and I met people from other religious persuasions, I clearly saw how it is that any formal faith, as solidified as it is into creeds, dogmas and set rituals, when the original sacred experiences are taken and reduced into canon, chapter and verse, is something any real 'seeker' will rather inevitably have to abandon. It's like some form of transportation that can only ever take you so far on your journey, before you will have to leave and continue the journey alone and on foot. And, as you start the long and perilous ascent of the mountain, you meet others (although few enough!) who are also bent upon the same goal, albeit who have arrived there in different transportation.

[2]"In Defence of Faith" is an essay that recounts these earliest mystical revelatory 'awakening' experiences that brought me from being the atheist I was at that time, to where I am now.
[3]Described in "In Defence of Faith" above
[4] There are many explanations and descriptions of this term 'Self'. See my own explanations in: https://elizabethcurrie.info/self-and-self-realisation/

As I walked through Delhi International Airport Departures on my way back to the UK at the end of the 2020 Pilgrimage stage in India, everywhere still on high alert with the pandemic still raging, I saw the words written ‘The Best and Beyond’ and knew that was a message, an affirmation for me then, already dedicated to my journey of renunciation, that that was what I had given myself to; and already by then in large measure had began to realise. I also knew that it was what Jesus called ‘the Pearl of Great Price’, something that you give everything for. Then I had already given up my life in the UK and all that meant to commit myself to this journey, the first stage of which had drawn me to India. I had no idea when I first committed myself to that journey that I would be required to adopt the Hindu faith and make special rituals called pujas at different venerable and ancient temples.

Across the course of two years and one of the most uncertain and potentially dangerous of times when a new unknown virus raged and took the lives of so may people, in 2020 and then again in 2021, I journeyed through the high Himalayas to different temples to do worship there, ever the only foreigner at a time when so few other people were travelling, and those generally other pilgrims[5]. As crazy at that seemed, risky, possibly irresponsible even, I knew I would always be safe and protected as my ambition, my goal, was ever the highest Sacred, which, having called me, inevitably then would protect me, as It always did.

So, what follows is the story of that most ambitious of all quests, to engage directly with ‘God’, and, if required, to die in so doing. Nothing less than that would ever have been acceptable for me. I knew that by myself, such an ambition would almost inevitably be way beyond my personal strengths and capacities, and test me in ways that might feel terrible; I knew that I was ‘weak’ and would need all kinds of grace and help for such an undertaking. But my heart by then was full of such love for ‘That’ and such a conviction that That was the most estimable goal that you could ever want, that I trusted I would be given whatever support and help I might need.

[5] During the main period of ‘Lockdown’ in India, all travel was restricted anyway and there was no conventional international tourism of any kind. With the later gradual easing of restrictions when some inter state travel was permitted with appropriate documentation, a few more traditional pilgrims began to journey again to the principal destinations, and I was one of them, although I never ever saw anyone else who conformed more to being a western looking traveller as I was.

Pilgrimage of the Heart

I called this my ‘Pilgrimage of the Heart’, because, at heart, it was about Love[6]; a Love that I had occasionally glimpsed through my life, but increasingly took over my life, that lured me to seek It, to give myself over to It completely. The Self is seductive, and once you engage with It, you are effectively lost to It. There is a beautiful line in a poem by the medieval Sufi mystic Rūmī where he says:

“Do not expect your heart to return;
When it dissolves in love,
It is gone for good.”[7]

I am making no disclaimers, apologies, nor diminishing what I say in order not to attract criticism, cynicism, disbelief or whatever. It doesn’t matter to me in any way if people reading this scoff at what I write, subject it to and dissect it with harsh rationalist scrutiny or whatever. As someone who spent their early life as a hard line atheist, I fully comprehend that many people are disinclined for all sorts of reasons to give any credence, sympathy or even tolerance to those who profess a belief in and direct experience of a non-material dimension and attendant forces[8].

I would be hard put to come up with any straightforward account of how I envisaged my own pilgrimage. Having long felt the need to do this journey, I took all my directives from that deep inner ‘calling’ that I long identified as coming from the Self. Some things were completely clear, however: I was clear that it had to be in India for example, for both higher mystical reasons as well as personal ones. I was clear that it must be conducted within the overall framework of the Yogic/Hindu religions, built around or periodically commemorated by making visits to temples to conduct personal ceremonies, which later became more formalised pujas, sometimes under the aegis of a Brahmin priest. I was clear that I had to

[6] There are actually many books with this title, presenting the concept from different perspectives, but the one that originally inspired me was by John R. Haule. 1992. *Pilgrimage of the Heart: The Path of Romantic Love.* Shambhala

[7] Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī. 2007. RUMI. Bridge to the Soul. Journeys into the Music and Silence of the Heart. ‘Gone for Good’. Poem 60, pp105. Translations by Coleman Barks, with A.J. Arberry and Nevit Ergin. Harper One/Harper Collins: New York, USA.

[8] The essay In Defence of Faith (see link above) addresses much of this, so I will simply make that available for readers to draw whatever conclusions they will and not repeat things already said there.

stay completely clear of anything that might be formally identifiable with Christianity (the religion of my British cultural background) whilst never losing touch with a deeper connection to the teachings of Jesus, which have long been my principal life guide, together with the Bhagavad Gita. I was also clear that I would be alone upon the journey, itself unsurprising given that it is how I have travelled for much of my life anyway. My life pathway had across the years, and particularly more recently, been gradually coalescing towards this point, and the calling to do this was felt ever more strongly. I felt absolutely called to give myself completely, outwardly expressed by giving up all that had counted as my life to then, both in terms of personal identity, career/occupation, as well as personal possessions. When I went to India, I went with the deep seated conviction and certainly the preparedness never to return; effectively to die out there.

Departure

On the 18th November 2019, I left my home town to start my pilgrimage. The first trip I ever made to India back in 2009, I wasn't even aware would actually serve to prepare me for such a journey. By the time of the second trip ten years later, I certainly knew that this is what it was. So when I left York, I knew, as did friends and family, that I was going away to India leaving everything behind me.

I took nothing with me excepting one small backpack and a small cabin baggage size suitcase. Everything else representing all my worldly goods had been dispersed in the previous months. In former times I had been used to packing my stuff up and putting it into storage, not that it was ever a lot and had been dwindling progressively with time. But, little as it was, it always acted as a sort of wick, a gravitational force to pull me back, not just to the location of York and the UK, but to the life and person I've always been. This time I knew I had to be thorough and get rid of absolutely everything and just take with me a minimal of clothing and personal goods, only what could be packed into those two small containers. Friends, family and the charity Oxfam were beneficiaries of clothing, art work, jewellery and all the beautiful original ethnic craft work and textiles I had collected from Ecuador since the very first visit I made there in 1976. I kept none of this, as for me it represented the core person I was letting go of. This journey was to be a kind of death and I very much conceived of it as such. I didn't plan on coming back, and there was a clear

minded and focused part of me that took great care to sabotage any possibility of returning to the old status quo. If one is to discover and engage with one's deeper self and aspects of self yet to be discovered, then you have to be prepared to divest yourself of everything that serves to bind you to the construct of the person you have grown into across your life. The clothing I took with me certainly defined much of the way I saw myself at the time, but I knew that I could always replace it with new things bought over there, as time and my journey advanced.

The final weeks build up to departure had comprised an increasingly urgent preparation to shut down my life as I had known it until then, to give away all that had represented that life in the form of possessions, to finish my obligations to the University project I had been engaged on, and then to put myself in the condition for the journey. Then the day itself finally arrived and I can still recall walking to the station to catch a train to the airport with my few belongings, indescribable feelings churning around inside me:

> "It's cold and bleak, and I've just boarded the train that will take me to the airport and the start of the journey that will take me far away from my home town in England, all the way to the Himalayas in geographic terms, but light years across the other side of the universe as understood by our modern societies and the world view underpinning this. I cry a little on the train, holding back the immense emotion of having just bid farewell to the person I hold dearest: my daughter, at the station. We were both brave during these final moments, but struggling to deal with what might be the ultimate reality of this: that I might never return and we might never see one another again.
>
> The bleak winter countryside speeds past the window, seen through a blur of tears. I have no idea what this journey will mean, starting in such a strange way. I feel in some ways the victim of this calling that I do this ultimate of journeys and become a renunciate. I have spent the best part of my life as an academic and researcher in one way or another, much of it in an entirely different theatre of operations the other side of the world: South America. This calling to go to India was unplanned and strange to me, having had no real feelings for that land until then. An unfriendly one-time friend had sometimes sharply reminded me that my life was, well, my 'choice', whenever I had felt moved to share difficult experiences or concerns. Yet, in reality, I

have felt that my life mostly chose me and was always its choice, not mine. Whenever I attempted to conform and plan my life in the worldly wise way, somehow it was ever thwarted by that hidden drive to strike out for the original, and take myself back off piste.

The flight is booked for later that day, so I have several hours to while away at the airport, working my way along the tedious trajectory from check in to security to departures to boarding gate. There is a not very generous connection time at Dubai, which I see slowly eroded as I sit on the plane and listen to the regular announcements about bad weather and ice on the wings. We are late leaving by more than an hour and I know my connection is likely lost. So far so good!

I know Dubai airport from my previous visit to India earlier that year, when I had spent a month in the south based at Bengaluru, doing a kind of dress rehearsal for the real performance now. It is vast and entirely given over to the world of consumerism. I had nicknamed it the 'the Halls of Mamon' with its glitz and faux glamour, interrupted occasionally by the five times daily Call to Prayer, when travellers and consumers are invited to remember the real underlying cause of Reality and venerate that instead.

I have missed my connection as predicted and so join the long queue of other anxious passengers to make necessary arrangements to have a new connection booked and call the hotel in Delhi who have arranged my original airport pickup. The intervening time is wiled away attempting to rest, have snacks and trying not to dwell overly on my circumstances, feeling bleaker and more challenging by the hour.

The long transfer wait and connecting flight finally over, I emerge blinking into the dimness of the evening at Delhi International airport, to be thankfully greeted by the waiting pickup and something far more evocative and welcome: the scent of warm spicy humidity which reassures my deeper spirit that I am closer to home than I might have feared.

The first stage of my Pilgrimage is completed and India, that strange land of contradictions, a land of temples and tigers, opens its arms to receive me.”

Part One.
India

Telling the Story

"When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable".

So wrote the great Indian philosopher, poet and historian Rabindranath Tagore, mystic as he also was, in verses so sublime of his encounters with Divinity, that I wouldn't hope to match them and therefore simply quote them here to convey that sense of the matchless ineffable.

As I contemplate telling this story of the journey of a lifetime, I am faced with the inevitable question about how to approach such an extraordinary narrative where the actual journey details are merely visible markers to the main theme, so infinitely more nuanced. Simply to 'start at the beginning, go on until the end and then stop' would be to string together sections and subsections of the story, narrative style, like a travelogue and risk losing that energy and mystique that ran like a sacred river through it and made it into the extraordinary experience it was. In contemplating it now as something now past, given how long it took me to let me to let go of it at all, I am primarily left with a feeling of wonder, hard to express in mere words. And poignancy too, that I had to let it go.

I first started documenting my journey several years ago when I was in Nepal in 2021, during the long weeks of the summer monsoon based at a small guest house in Pokhara, waiting to travel onwards to Muktinath in the remote province of Mustang, close to Tibet. Following my first return to the UK from India in November 2020, India had closed its borders to international travellers as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, so Nepal, which had very lately and in a very limited way re-opened to tourism, had been the only viable alternative and staying longer in the UK then wasn't something I could contemplate. As the portals of the UK and Nepal briefly aligned, I made my escape, travelling awkwardly via Copenhagen and Istanbul to Kathmandu, to commence what subsequently for me became

a kind of 'add on' to the main India Pilgrimage. Since both were largely carried out within the Himalayas, geo-political boundaries are likely irrelevant anyway as the Indigenous cultures and religions in these parts significantly overlap. So it was a full year on from the main Pilgrimage year of 2020 that I started to document my journey in a website and blog I later called In the Spirit, many of the narratives from which rather inevitably will find their way into this book.

Sri Krishnamurthy spoke of 'The pathless pathway' as being the only really authentic way to make the spiritual journey in a world where we are expected to have plans and itineraries for everything we do. From the outside, to any random observer, my journey of a lifetime would have looked just that - random - made up as I went along, responding to the inner weathervane as it swung back and forth, manifesting my deeper inclinations. Living and travelling like this throws you constantly onto your wits and deeper spiritual directives, as rather inevitably you have minimal financial resources to buffer you - an important part of the spiritual deal as it were - therefore being inventive, flexible and open to the unusual is absolutely part of the fine art of Pilgrimage. I have probably never been in the league of those who literally walk the roads on their journeys, so being a virtual sadhu was all I could really ever aspire to, but I don't think this was ever mandatory, for me anyway. I took cars sometimes, occasionally flights. But my life was nevertheless styled upon the wandering sadhu, even if I didn't particularly look like one from the outside. I had formally renounced life in the world, having given away most all of my belongings and any pretensions at continuing my former career in academia, or anything else.

The first visit I ever made to India had been ten years earlier in 2009, when my original plan had been to travel north up to the mountains from the south, but I had burned out and aborted the trip far earlier and therefore simply flew from Delhi six weeks after arriving, and the mountains had remained unvisited. After my initial arrival into Delhi following my emotional departure from the UK in November 2019, it seemed a sensible idea, if I can call it that, to make at least one cursory visit as the mountains are far more accessible from the capital. After some brief online research I settled on Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, knowing little enough about it then, and how it would prove to be the epicentre of the whole spiritual journey, Nepal excepted. As the famous location where the Beatles met the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968 and kick started the whole New Age scene, I was curious as to what I might find there.

My memories of that time have rather inevitably become more remote with the passage of the intervening years. It was getting cold with the onset of winter and proximity of the mountains, and my earlier visit to India in the spring of 2019 had focussed on the south, with Bangalore my base, and later Kochi. So aside from that earlier trip to Delhi, I was ill-prepared for the cultural mix and vibe of the North, as different to the South as were the geography, cuisine and music. It was also my first sight of the Ganges, sublime enough at such an altitude and proximity to its source, a clear translucent turquoise, very far from the broad turgid brown river that I later encountered at Varanasi.

Rishikesh

I spent five days in Rishikesh this first visit, still feeling clueless and very resistant to the whole ashram and yoga scene that Rishikesh is so famous for. The prevalence of western visitors everywhere saluting each other with 'namaste', joined hands in prayer style, making pious references to Hindu saints, religious practices, meditation and sundry esoteric themes, generally presaged with Hare Om and similar, only served to confirm my prejudices. Brahmins from local temples, swamis from the many ashrams, assorted yogis in cheesecloth sporting dreadlocks and colourful sadhus of many specie were prevalent everywhere, and the swarm of pedestrian traffic over the famous Lakshman Jhula bridge[9] offered a vivid cross spectrum of the then life in the town: tourists, travellers, local pilgrims, yogis of every nationality clad in white, monkeys, men dressed up as monkeys, and even the occasional cow that freely roamed with casual confidence through the town, this being one of the epicentres of what is sometimes referred to as 'the cow belt', being the heartlands of fundamentalist Hinduism, where cattle are always sacred and untouchable.

Rishikesh for Ravers[10]

> “Rishikesh lies in the valley of a gorge of the still young River Ganges in the first low foothills of the Himalayas in the northern state of Uttarakhand. It has an ancient

[9]Note this was the original, as at publication the new replacement is now in operation.

[10]https://elizabethcurrie.info/2022/04/11/rishikesh-for-ravers/

pedigree as a sacred pilgrimage location, home to many temples, particularly those dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is described thus in the early 20th century:

> “A village or town beautifully situated on the right bank of the Ganges, on a high cliff overlooking the river. The place is developing very rapidly, especially since the construction of the new bridge over the Song river, the realignment of the pilgrim road from Raiwala to Rishikesh” [The Gazeteer of Dehra Dun, by ICS office HG Walton. 2016/1910].’
>
> https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rishikesh

My first memory of Rishikesh was back in pre pandemic days, shortly after I had arrived into Delhi on the first stage of my Pilgrimage and knowing little if anything about it, decided I would make it my first port of call. Although certainly I had read that it was the location originally made famous by the Beatles visit here in 1968 to the ashram of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation fame, that was not why I came here and I have ever found the constant reminders both irrelevant and tiresome.

It was late November 2019 and already starting to get noticeably cooler, especially at night. I had had limited exposure to the kinds of new age and yoga scenes already flourishing at hot spots like Rishikesh and came well prepared to be completely underwhelmed by it. Large hoardings depicting different swamis clothed in saffron or white, sporting mandatory beatific smiles, billboards advertising yoga schools of many different kinds, but perhaps most of all, an all consuming construction, greeted new arrivals. The hotel I had booked to stay in not far from the famous Laxman Jhula bridge had construction sites all around, so no matter which side your room, you were guaranteed to hear large pneumatic machinery pretty much throughout the day. What price peace?

Until then I had had a fair exposure to southern India in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and a little of Karnataka; also Mumbai and Goa during the first trip I ever made to the country ten years earlier, but the north of the country was still a mystery to me. Before Independence, during the latter days of British rule, my father’s family had lived in Kanpur and he had gone to school in Dehradun, and this was my only sense of a connection to the north, so it was also with some curiosity that I arrived in the region where my father had passed the most formative years of his childhood. Not

that he would have recognised it in anyway. From being famous as a sacred pilgrimage destination, it's very name suggestive of the long tradition of sages who had passed time there reflecting upon and writing about the ancient esoteric Vedic spiritual traditions, it has morphed firstly into a global centre for yoga and meditation, and from there into a destination for adventure tourism, with bungee jumping and white water rafting topping the list of attractions for thrill seekers in no way interested in spiritual development of any kind at all.

During the eight long months of the Indian lockdown across the summer of 2020 when I was grounded here, I began my deeper study of the Eastern yoga schools and theological traditions, and I recall doing an online search of ashrams here and counted at least one hundred of widely varying calibre. In those days the place was still full of a motley assortment of western visitors, even after the different embassy-initiated repatriation drives bore the many stranded following the global shutdown of air travel back to their own countries.

Eventually the Indian government stopped issuing gratis visa extensions to the diehards who had stayed on (I had been one) and issued notices to quit instead, effectively clearing the last of the Western yogi and hippie franchise from the town and leaving it free for the domestic tourism which soon filled the vacuum. When I finally arrived back into Rishikesh a week ago after a hiatus of some eighteen months duration, the streets were still full of the usual ambulant cattle, but now tourists from Delhi too, as Rishikesh has effectively become a suburb of the capital.

It is hard to exaggerate the contrast between the town as it was in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown and the town as it is now. I recall waking one morning and hearing nothing but the wind and the birds. It amazed me that there were so many birds, but of course they had always been there, just drowned out by the all consuming roar of passing traffic. I took a walk early one morning down to the banks of the river known as 'the beach', once the focus of the rafting ventures that have come to dominate life on the Ganges now. All was deserted; no people, no rafts, just a couple of itinerant dogs, a distant figure far up the bank, the wind and the birds and sunlight glittering on the river water. It was so beautiful! I imagined it must have been as it was some hundred years ago before the thrill seekers had taken it over.

From my room at the Greenhills hotel I could look down the road and see just the ambulant cattle wandering around, and occasionally two police officers with long canes patrolling the streets on motorbike. During part of the day people were allowed out for essential shopping, and, if discreet, could walk to the river or elsewhere and enjoy the peace and space and views of the surrounding forested hills, the sounds of the peacocks calling in the distance. As the summer slowly passed and more freedom of movement allowed, more people, more traffic and renewed construction activity resumed. Then came the day at the end of September when the first rafts reappeared upon the river, and the old status quo re-established itself.

This of course is not unique to Rishikesh, it's the global order of reality now as the wild spaces of the earth dimmish yearly. People shrug when you talk of rights for the earth and its other inhabitants as if they need to earn their right to be here, so only if their presence pulls visitors who spend money can they be seen to count. And anyway, isn't that what the different wild life reserves are for? Uttarakhand is one of the very few political entities to have enshrined rights to nature in its laws, yet to look at what is happening here, you would never know this.

What price the sacred? Far from being beyond the realms of profane secular reality, the sacred has now become merely another commodity. I could not convey to people outside of India what the river Ganges means in terms of Hindu beliefs and traditions. Merely to bathe in it is believed to wash away one's sins and prepare one for death. A small industry has now grown for people to take its waters in plastic containers (which are then discarded) for general use in home and temple. But now the gleaming, undulating body of sacred Mother Ganga hosts thrill seekers and water sports enthusiasts earning lucrative profit for the many business who trade off its fame."

In 2020 the town was still very much dominated by the international traveller and backpacker set with relatively few Indian tourists, excepting the few genuine pilgrims to the different temples. I have never been in any way attracted to New Age culture and was distrustful of the whole ashram scene too, though admittedly knowing little enough about it.

So, feeling little enlightened and still clueless, I left and took a flight from Dehradun south to Jaipur to continue my journey, in the early stages of succumbing to a severe respiratory virus contracted in my hotel that grounded me with a cough in the famous red city, and this before coronavirus had actually exploded onto the international scene as it did the following year. Jaipur was sadly therefore a rather missed opportunity. I hired an autorickshaw to take me on a tour of the old city centre one morning, and that was that; the next two days I was grounded with a cough in my hotel room, until it felt imperative to move on again, westwards this time and to Ranthambore, which, with its famous fortress and tiger reserve acted as lures from my earlier life as an avid watcher of wildlife documentaries.

Ranthambore offered some natural alternative and respite from spiritual seeking, but alas no tigers whatever to see, excepting for the immense tiger photos adorning the wall over your bed and a jeep tour around the reserve early one morning, with fellow visitors who talked loudly and constantly. Listening to the nightly conversations of other travellers in the restaurant talking of their tiger sightings didn't help my mood, and apart from a visit to the extensive medieval fort one day, there was little enough else to do. I found myself drawn into conversations with the young hotel receptionist sometimes who felt moved to share his story with me, striking me deeply with the awful fetters that culture and religion set upon humanity. His childhood sweetheart was a young Hindu girl and he carried her photo on his phone which he showed me. She so looked beautiful clad in the bright traditional festive dress of a Hindu. But he was a Moslem himself from a traditional family and had been forced to marry a Moslem girl, whom he didn’t love. His hopes were to be able to get a visa to work in the UK and make a better income and life, something I regularly heard from young men everywhere I met in my different travels, and felt that sense of sorrowful compassion at the almost inevitable impossibility of his ever being able to do this. I eventually bade him farewell at the station late one night as he had promised to escort me there and see me onto the train, and that was the last I ever saw or heard of him. But sometimes I still think of him and people like him, men and women, who are effective prisoners of their cultures and upbringings and likely doomed to spend the rest of their lives in unhappy marriages doing work they hate, dreaming of another life somewhere ‘out there’ in a different country, another world.

Eventually I took the night train to Udaipur, boarding late at night at the cold windy station and scrambling with other passengers to find my upper level bunk. I had had to settle for a second class accommodation given first class was fully booked, so there was more of the make do rough and ready about this arrangement, packed in with everyone else with a flimsy curtain alone offering some privacy. The motion of the train quickly rocked me to sleep, but I was awoken too early by two little girls enthusiastically waking their grandad who had the sleeper bunk underneath mine. Then we arrived into the golden city early in the morning where an auto rickshaw took me to the little budget hotel I had booked into, close to one of the lakes over looking the golden medieval palace. My abiding memory of that first trip into the city was of the sheer poverty and squalor that so many people still live in, despite the relative affluence of these modern times, and in India, where the average income is probably significantly higher now than back in the UK. The sight of so many people scraping such a basic existence in the suburban slums, and children in particular clearly suffering from the avoidable diseases of poverty, struck me deeply.

I spent a couple of weeks here, still feeling strange and with no clear inward directive as to how to proceed. Winter in the north was fast closing in, and although warm enough during the day, the evenings, nights and early mornings were cold. I walked around the ancient city, with its lakes and gilded turrets and tales of James Bond film sets, and soaked up the waning sunshine on the roof of my homestay, occasionally joining in the many wedding processions that passed noisily in the streets below, Udaipur being one of the popular wedding venues for the country. There are particular slots in a year that Indians count as auspicious for weddings, mid December being one, and my homestay was opposite one of the many venues about the city set up for the traditional Hindu festivities. Thoughts of Kerala, still warm although not too hot at that time of year, teased my imagination, and the little homestay in the centre of Fort Kochi where I had stayed in the past, where the family always made you feel welcome and at home.

So I headed south, like some migratory bird, as the winter closed in in the north and temperatures dropped steadily. Kerala by this time was far less hot than my memories of it in the spring visit I had made, yet still welcomingly warm. And here it was - finally- that I began to feel some inner sense of movement, some progress in the direction of the spiritual goal that had, until then, eluded me.

Looking back on it now, it was of course unrealistic to somehow expect to slot into such an extraordinary journey which inevitably would demand particular and unusual strengths, straight from a life immersed in the conventional world and academia, and all that had meant. Everything had to be stripped back and allowed time to rest and reset, like a field laying fallow. I needed to let go of the highly intellectual analytical mindset that was habitually my modus operandi and allow a connection with deeper more creative centres to be made. The previous years spent in Ecuador on the University project had at least prepared me for this, however. I had even then began to open myself up to that deeper connection with the Self, preparing the way for this intensification of the higher spiritual quest and what that would demand. This I did spending much time withdrawn from the outside, sitting in the small, enclosed guest house courtyard by the fish pond, making little drawings and writing poetry in a small 'book of the pilgrimage'.

Indian classical bansuri music with tabla would float in from the gardens of the nearby heritage hotel on the harbour side during the evenings, setting the mood. Christmas loomed and a giant Santa Claus stood guard over the entrance to my homestay. The kind family, traditional Kerala Catholic Christians, left Christmas presents for their few guests: or me a small brass kerala oil lamp, a bell, and a book of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore, some of which inspired my blog posts and are inluded in this book. Mosquitos abounded. A couple from Australia who were studying Kashmiri Shivaism at a local spiritual centre took me out for Christmas lunch at a fancy shoreside restaurant. And with the looming new year I invested in a bright and beautiful magenta silk saree, which I would wear to the different temples I had decided to visit to make private worship, called in India 'pujas'. I settled upon the famous Krishna temple at Guruvayur, several hours drive north along the coast from Kochi, to begin the formal stage of my Pilgrimage, planned for 1st January 2020, little aware of how life changing that year was to prove to be, in so many ways.

Guruvayur.

My hosts had warned me that the Krishna temple at Guruvayur would likely be off limits for me as a foreigner, however appropriately dressed I was. Others had apparently tried and failed, but thence I travelled anyway, determined at the least to give it a try. I had tried to

learn how to wrap a saree using a useful YouTube tutorial and with friendly help from different Indian women encountered on the way, who would smile indulgently and congratulate me on my efforts, before proceeding to rewrap me from the beginning. The young hotel receptionist at Guruvayur had been enlisted to assist me dressing the morning before I left for my temple visit.

I felt horribly nervous and self-conscious, this being my formal debut, but as ever I was guided by that deep inner directive that this was all part of the early test that my Pilgrimage demanded, to put myself up for these challenges and carry them off with grace and dignity, irrelevant of the outer world and its reaction. It was after all, all about my dedication to the Higher Self (in whatever form the particular temple God was represented) and I saw these visits (there were to be many following this first) as where I gave and re-gave myself to Its worship, and endured whatever discomfort that might entail. I had determined that, even if barred from entering, I would assemble a makeshift altar and do my puja at that instead. And so, early on the morning after my arrival in the town, an autorickshaw bore me to the large sprawling temple complex, and I mustered all the courage I could and sallied forth through the outer quadrangles, past the large rectangular cistern of water found in all temples for ritual bathing purposes, until I arrived at the entrance to the inner sanctuary, guarded by security controls and x ray screening.

There were large crowds of other temple goers, it being New Year's Day, throngs of people entering and leaving through the inner gates, and probably inevitably I attracted a good deal of attention. I had brought with me the little Kerala oil lamp, incense sticks, and other offerings suitable for a puja. The security guard immediately halted me as I tried to walk nonchalantly through and demanded I step aside. He called a Brahmin priest on duty who proceeded to explain that foreigners were never allowed into their temples, no exceptions, despite my spirited defence. The best he could offer was to take my small lamp and light it for me on the altar inside. I suggested it might be helpful if they at least provided a separate place where people like me, sincere worshippers from overseas dedicated to their Faith could do pujas, instead of being rejected in this way. It all fell upon deaf, uninterested ears however and so, nonplussed and frustrated, I seized a red plastic chair nearby, set it up just outside of the security gate and laid out my altar regalia there instead. I am not in any way a performer, someone who loves to attract attention to themselves. My ego is ever anxious to protect me from scrutiny of any kind, favourable or unfavourable.

So, there I found myself, kneeling in full public view of the crowds of temple visitors, making this weird exhibition of myself. I decided it had to be a kind of sacrifice, and that I still had to carry it all off with as much dignity and sincerity as I could muster. It felt awful, but I also knew that to accept defeat and be turned ignominiously away at the door of the Divine in this way was simply not an option, no way whatever to start my Pilgrimage and a terrible symbol. I felt deeply the truth of this. But as it was to prove, in the end, this inauspicious start to my temple visits was not to be typical, as in the majority of cases I was always welcomed in, Brahmins included and encouraged to worship. I was later to learn that Shiva temples were, by and large, more tolerant of respectful foreign visitors than others, although this wasn't inevitably the case. Returning, if rather traumatised, to my hotel room, I lay upon my bed, still fully dressed in my temple finery, and tried to process the experience, reluctant to let go of it now it was over. I had no idea how the rest of my Pilgrimage and planned temple visits as a part of it would evolve, what other difficulties I might encounter, but at least I had made a genuine start, had been inventive over the obstacles presented, and I felt I could be happy for that.

January and February progressed, and I visited another old temple in Kochi, before travelling down to Varkala, further south along the coast of Kerala, to spend some time on the beach and make more pujas here, mainly at the famous Shri Janardhana Swamy Vishnu Temple. And I learned that most people, Brahmins included, actually welcomed my visits and were happy to see me dressed in my saree.

Looming distantly if darkly on the horizon of these days, getting slowly but increasingly nearer, unsettling news of the evolving coronavirus pandemic, then still designated a mere epidemic, became harder to ignore. I had had a brief but severe cough coming from Rishikesh, which had afflicted my time spent in Jaipur and Ranthambore but decided that it was likely unrelated. This was apparently something different, deemed to come from China, and which few people then had any real understanding of. As time went by, travel restrictions increased, and the epidemic became upgraded by WHO to full pandemic status.

No-one knew what to expect or how to plan, especially travellers. Come March I decided, with the approach of spring and warming of the weather, it was time to return to the mountains, to Rishikesh. At least I knew, in part, what to expect now of this famed

international yoga location, and in fact I coincided with one of the annual international Yoga festivals, where the great and the good and gurus of every specie turned up, attracting crowds of devotees from around the world to hear them at their Satsang – Sitting with Truth sessions. Perhaps inevitably the guest houses and hotels were all full, so I was fortunate to find space in any, short notice as it was.

I had by then settled a little more into the idea of my Pilgrimage, focused as it was on these occasional temple visits, and it seemed that Rishikesh would likely be a good place to go given its importance across centuries as a Pilgrimage destination with many temples, and with the sacred Ganga River flowing through it. Unfortunately my guest house arrangement proved to be a scam and I had to move on at short notice, but fortuitously found the one room left at a hotel which was to become my proxy home there across many months and future visits: Hotel Greenhills.

I would be hard put to offer a summary view of Rishikesh at all, and my early experience of it. I later wrote several posts in my In the Spirit Blog dedicated to it and the feelings it elicited: complex, contradictory and not altogether favourable as they were. The ceaseless traffic and round-the-clock-construction, the ambling groups of cattle, swarms of visitors, and the overall domination of the New Age, yoga and International backpacker scene was ever a turn off for me. Greenhills itself was full of yoga enthusiasts at the time and people I met in the garden restaurant there encouraged me to go to see different gurus of international fame who were featured in the festival, but I was never tempted. For me the pathway to Ultimate Truth lay within me, and the calling to find It. I already had a strong if strange connection with my only Guru, the Higher Self, later learning that this path of aloneness actually had a name: Kaivalya. I had never and never since have I ever felt called to find a guru, teacher, other guide or adviser. Indeed, even as the medieval mystic poet Kabir advises in his poem ‘O Friend' “Know the true Guru”[11]! The Self Itself will guide you to Itself if your heart is pure and your yearning for It sincere.

[11] From: ‘O Friend’ in https://turbulentpriest.net/2024/02/04/o-friend/

Varanasi

A few days into my stay, I decided I should go to Varanasi, surprising given I had never felt drawn to visiting this famed ancient city before and couldn't quite understand what this sudden calling meant. Varanasi, or Benares as it is more correctly known, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, is considered the oldest city on earth, understood to have been founded by the Hindu God Shiva in deepest antiquity. It can justifiably claim to be the spiritual capital of India, attracting the devout to bathe in Ganga's sacred waters which flow through it. Many colourful festivals are celebrated along the ghats. Sadhus in particular aim to end their life here, as well as it being the place where many Hindus go to die and be cremated on the sacred riverbanks, thereby ensuring their release from the wheel of Samsara – earthly rebirth.

These early journeys were probably inevitably dominated by fraught decisions on where to stay, a balance between budget and comfort. This was because I never felt I had to conform to some renunciates' view of most basic accommodation. I wasn't looking for upmarket places, which I could never have justified for several reasons, but that didn't mean I always had to slum it in cheap hostels or guest houses either. In those days Greenhills was on the modest side of being moderate, far from what it became in later years. So in Varanasi I decided on an attractive location in the ancient sprawling palace complex right on the banks of the river, which had been converted into a heritage hotel. It required an awkward navigation of the veritable labyrinth of narrow medieval streets between the main city thoroughfare and the river to get to it however and you needed to meet a hotel courier at one of the many hidden portals to convey you there.

Happily, my room offered a delightful view right over the river to the opposite shore from an enclosed balcony, where you could lie in bed and watch the sunrise, and the little boats coming and going. A massive electric storm my second night there I watched lightening forks strike the opposite bank repeatedly, with ear splitting overhead cracks of thunder. It seemed, strangely, to herald the troubled times looming, getting daily closer.

Two brothers ran the operation, and when I explained that I had come there to find a suitable temple (from the more than two thousand in the city) to conduct a puja to Shiva,

they instantly embraced my quest, determining that I had in fact been called by Shiva Himself to go there.

"You have been called by Lord Shiva. Do not worry. We will help you!"

It was arranged that I see their priest in his consultation chamber up a narrow staircase in one of the ancient buildings in the rambling old city not far away. His room was small and rather scruffy and his apparel rather scruffy too, and I felt uncertain about what I was letting myself into. He offered his credentials as someone consulted by Hollywood luminaries such as Michael Jackson and Goldie Hawn, but I've never been someone particularly impressed by 'name dropping', including, or more especially perhaps, celebrities. I countered with some personal information of my own, what it was I was aiming for, and we eyed one another uncomfortably. I wanted to give myself to God in a special dedication ceremony, but this seemed not well understood. Possibly he felt his real powers as a priest (given his account of his services to the celebrities) were being sidelined somehow. I couldn't decide. In the end he suggested I go for a full Rudrabishek puja, a special several hour-long ceremony dedicated to the worship of Lord Shiva, requiring several priests who would assist me with the demands of the ceremony and offer the appropriate formalities and chants. It was clearly going to be expensive, but I felt incapable of withdrawing by then, especially given the two hotel brothers had arranged it for me.

I was conducted to a nearby ATM and proceeded to withdraw a large sum of cash. He assured me he would get all the necessary goods required and we arranged a date and time. I was born on a Monday, itself considered auspicious given it is the day sacred to Lord Shiva, so the puja was arranged for that Monday. My actual birthday was to be in just over a week's time. One of the hotel brothers agreed to take me to the temple in a cab waiting up on the main road, and I set off early that morning on the back of a moped, dressed in my magenta saree, zooming through the dark labyrinth of back alleyways crowded with all manner of folk and probably little changed across the centuries.

Shooltankeshwar where the temple was, was situated some 15 kilometres outside of Varanasi and purportedly the location where Lord Shiva had come to earth to determine where to locate the very first city. Of all the temples in the ancient city formerly known as Benares, it was considered one of the most important for this reason. I had no idea whatever what to expect, but my priestly companion whom we had picked up en route with

puja paraphernalia, was on hand. In the end I had agreed to just two additional priests to set up the puja offerings and to chant the Sanskrit mantras. My main memory is being overhung by bells of every size, surrounded by plumes of incense and crowds of other worshippers each intent upon their own private pujas. A presiding Brahmin sat to one side overseeing the whole.

An immense Shivalinga stood in the centre of the sanctum, with a large copper cobra head poised above it, and here we all poured our offerings of ghee, yoghurt, sundry spices, flowers, water, leaves and most of all, milk. A rudrabishek puja demands a full gallon of this which is poured as a steady libation over the conical linga, set within the yoni receptacle basin. It's delivered through two brass cow horn shaped vessels, in a thin arched stream by the devotee, who chants the sacred mantra 'Om Namah Shivayah' throughout, considered one of the most powerful and important of Hindu mantras. Unquestionably demanding, I flagged periodically, my arms aching from the strain of holding the brass horns, and the accompanying priest who was chanting the other requisite Vedic mantras in a long continuous monotone, took over from time to time. There was a sense of some very sacred transaction happening. As ignorant as I was of the whole puja protocols, I needed constant assistance with the format of offerings, where they went, to which deity and so on. But there was no sense of judgement or criticism. I have generally experienced much tolerance and encouragement from the majority of Hindu fellow temple visitors who are happy that a foreigner wants to worship to their deities at all.

The entire ceremony was close to being three hours, but eventually it ended. I was taken before the presiding brahmin and given back some of the offerings I had made to the Shivalinga, including something I still have: a rope of sacred rudraksha beads[12], considered characteristic of devotees of Lord Shiva, worn by many sadhus and which I was told would thereafter denote me as a devotee of Shiva myself. And, tired and dazed, but feeling I had crossed some vital threshold, I was packed back into the waiting vehicle, and we headed back to the hotel in Varanasi.

I never saw the priest again, who clearly considered his job over. But it was only a matter of days anyway before the looming threat of the pandemic made it clear that it might be better to leave Varanasi and return to Rishikesh sooner than later. As I entered airport

[12] See e.g., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudraksha

departures, the police checking travellers were already wearing face masks. I arrived back into Greenhills on the Thursday after the puja and by that following Monday, a mere week later, the whole of India was put into lockdown status.

Aside from the puja itself, my memory of Varanasi was probably inevitably defined by the river and the walks I made along the ghats, sometimes observing the many cremations on the riverbanks from a distance. The actual town was too chaotic for me to want to venture far into it for long. I made a solitary boat trip on Ganga's waters, but never felt tempted to immerse myself in its sacred embrace, contented to throw water over myself from the boat. A long distance on from its shining turquoise clarity at Rishikesh, the river by Varanasi was immense, slow moving and a turgid brown, and knowledge of its load of cremation ashes, sewerage and garbage of every variety made me less than enthusiastic about entering it.

LOCKDOWN

Rather inevitably when I commenced the Pilgrimage, I had had no idea what to expect, how long it was to be for or how the time would evolve, excepting it would be passed in India. In some ways it could even have been seen as a continuation of the month spent in the south of India way back in March and April of 2019, which I had anyway viewed as a kind of dress rehearsal for the real thing planned later in that year, after the three-year University project I had been engaged upon finally ended. I had arrived clueless into Delhi in late November and allowed deeper instincts, or whatever it was guiding me, to govern where I went afterwards. So the coronavirus pandemic striking out of the blue was rather inevitably a game changer. Forces beyond my control had taken over and would dictate how the next six months panned out, marooning me in the Tapovan district of Rishikesh in Hotel Greenhills for long weeks across the course of the summer.

And it soon emerged how lucky I had been, to have managed to get back to Rishikesh in time and to be staying in what was actually a very pleasant location, given the immediate travel embargos imposed and that many people found themselves locked down into whichever hostel or homestay they had originally checked into and were then prevented moving on from. If I had remained any longer in Varanasi, there I would have had to have stayed across the whole summer. A young Brazilian woman whom I later became friends

with told me she had just managed to escape a crowded dormitory of several women and got a small apartment close to Greenhills just on the eve of being locked down. Others had found themselves in squalid, cockroach and mosquito infested residences that perforce must be coped with across long weeks.

Lack of information or ability to plan was the prevailing norm and what little news there was was relayed by the hotel management via reception, usually updated on a weekly basis. I had been worried that I might be asked to leave as several of the local ashrams and I understand some guest houses too had closed and asked their guests to leave, but had been reassured not to worry. Greenhills originally had five guests surviving from their earlier full to capacity of the international Yoga festival week, but this gradually reduced to two: me and a French woman and artist who had been coming to stay there over many years and knew the management and their families well. We were to be the last surviving remnants of what had once been a bustling and lucrative hospitality business. March finally ended, marked by my birthday, and April advanced into May. In the early weeks the lockdown directive was regularly renewed on a fortnightly basis. You would wait for days only to be told that the lockdown had been extended yet again for two more weeks.

In the first days there were hundreds of other stranded foreign travellers in town, erstwhile of the main ashrams and local guest houses. Rishikesh, especially in the wake of an annual International Yoga Festival, was always awash with tourists, wellness groupies and yoga enthusiasts. No one knew what was happening or how to proceed, and stories and advice sharing popped up on the many on-line fora and Rishikesh Facebook groups. The many small organic stores that Tapovan is famous for were mostly open for people to buy produce, and many additional small family run fruit and vegetable stalls in the street also appeared, but otherwise all cafes and restaurants had closed. I was lucky inasmuch as Greenhills hotel garden restaurant still continued to provide meals for me and Annie, the French woman also staying there, but we had to eat in our rooms. An impromptu lucrative pizza delivery service supplying the nearby residential development helped give staff a little much needed business. As time continued to pass, Annie, well known anyway to the management and I became adsorbed into the extended family and staff of the hotel. I knew several of those running it almost as friends by then and we felt a sort of supportive and cohesive camaraderie, the premises set back from the main Badrinath highway outside behind a wall of tall screening palm trees. Morning and evening the jangling bells,

cymbals and mantra chantings from a small temple up on the nearby hill announced the arrival and passing of yet another day.

My first room (I was to have three in all) was spacious, with a very large balcony set with potted shrubs and colourful bougainvilleas looking straight onto the highway outside. Generally the thundering passing traffic made it far from peaceful, but with the closing down of most every aspect of life, the road became eerily quiet, and dominated by the straggling groups of cattle that Rishikesh is populated with. There came a day when lines of coaches and buses turned up and parked the other side of the hotel, organised by different embassies to collect their stranded citizens for repatriation flights back home. I watched the lines of people: Asian, European, American, queue up with their baggage and disappear into the buses with a strange kind of wistfulness. I knew I couldn't go back, although unquestionably there was a part of me that wished that I could. My Pilgrimage was not by any means finished, and to have returned to the UK at such a time would have been to have aborted the critical if obscure processes that were slowly underway within me.

There was little enough to do, especially given the curfew and proscription on travel anywhere, aside from shopping for basics. Pairs of officers of the local constabulary rode around on motorcycles policing the roads, armed with lattis – the long canes used to beat recalcitrant members of the public, or in this case anyone found violating the curfew with no good reason. If you were careful and discreet, you could sometimes manage a walk down to Neem beach – usually the focus of the adventure rafting business and standardly crowded with tourists, but it was always a risk. I recall one beautiful early morning when I was the only visitor there, one small figure excepting much further up the beach and a couple of lone dogs, sat on a rock by the river in the sunshine, absorbing the scene: the wind, the sparkling rushing river waters, the fresh air and birdsong. It must have been how it was a century or more ago before tourism had claimed it for adventure travel, changing it forever.

Probably inevitably, lacking the usual conventional rhythms or markers, time and my memories of that time all became rather a blur, with odd distinctive experiences and episodes poking up out of it rather like tree or hill tops in an otherwise flooded landscape. Very early on, before the real severity of the curfew restrictions took hold and clearer rules

had been set for what was on or off limits, I have memories of weird episodes, like attempting to cross the Lakshman Jhula bridge just as police were in the process of closing it. Many of the budget and hippier of the ashrams hosting western spiritual seekers were situated on the far side of Ganga, crossed either by Lakshman Jhula bridge in the centre of the town, or Ram Jhula much further away. But there was this informal convention of always needing to cross to the side of the river opposite to where you normally lived to do your puja. So this morning a few of us had gathered on the nearside hoping to cross, just as the gates were being closed. The bridge was completely deserted by then, save a solitary aged cow with long crooked horns standing midway along, a far cry from the days it had been crowded with pedestrians and pilgrims. Seeing people apparently entering through gates on the far side gave the impression that crossing was still viable, so we shinned up the barricades and onto the bridge we went. I was assisted by a young guy from Rajasthan, there for his own spiritual journey. But it was all short lived. The few other people who had been part of the venture seemingly melted away leaving he and I standing conspicuously there mid bridge, together with the cow, as police promptly slammed shut the gates on the other side shouting angrily at us for being there, waving their lattis threateningly. My companion informed me ruefully that I was lucky not to speak Hindi, so I couldn't understand what they were saying. We had to turn ignominiously around and re-present at the nearside barriers again, awkwardly confronting the police there who looked sternly at us, contemptuous of my "I'm terribly sorry officer, was the bridge really closed then?" Fortunately we were allowed to pass without further incident and, in the end, I had to make my small solitary birthday puja down on the near side of the riverbank in Lakshman Jhula the following day, as unobtrusively as possible. It was my seventieth birthday and so I felt it needed marking with some distinctive ritual. Distinctive, memorable indeed it most certainly had been!

Greenhills

The entire lockdown period of some six months - longer in the immediate aftermath - I was based at Hotel Greenhills on the Badrinath Road, Tapovan district of Rishikesh. Here it was the most intense and personal phases of my spiritual journey and development took place, uninterrupted as it was by any real impact of life or decision making from the outside world. I was very much held in a protective space.

Greenhills had been constructed some twenty years earlier, a large concrete several story hotel sporting small exterior balconies to each room, and the entire facade painted green. It had been under different management during its life and declined across time, but had recently been taken over by a different family and enjoyed a much needed revival. The rooms were clean and comfortable enough with standard facilities and an overall modern feel, although the cost was really not sustainable for someone on my limited pilgrims' budget for too long. It became an increasing source of anxiety as the weeks passed, how I was going to manage the accumulating charges. A young French woman who had also been staying there in the early weeks was in a similar predicament and had bought herself a small electric hotplate to cook her own meals. Eventually she disappeared to stay with friends the other side of the river, after the most rigid restrictions on movement had been lifted a little. That deep wise counsel experienced as a kind of upwelling within that communicates largely through insight, but, if more rarely, as a direct instruction to the conscious personality, and which I have long understood as being the Higher Self[13], reassured me that all would be well and not to worry. There would be solutions.

The distinctive selling feature of Greenhills was its 1960s pop culture themed garden restaurant, an extension of the Beatles café further down in the warren of back alleyways of Lakshman Jhula itself. The one time famous four had flirted with Indian theology way back in the 1960s when they had come to Rishikesh and stayed at an ashram of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968, although not for long as I understand. This brief flirtation kick started the whole of the western obsession with 'New Age' – a term originally invented by C.G. Jung denoting the coming of the Age of Aquarius[14].

Many people enjoy and even court nostalgic reminders of the music of their youth, but I am not one of them, so the semi constant stream of sixties pop music broadcast on loud speakers in the garden, as well as in the restaurant itself was an unavoidable source of irritation that only the practising of a strict Zen approach could begin to mitigate against. The fact that it was being broadcast to almost no guests during the long weeks of strictly enforced lockdown conditions made it harder to endure, as there was no logic for its being

[13] There are many explanations of the concept of the Self, both in Analytical (Jungian) Psychology as well as Eastern theological traditions. See e.g., https://carl-jung.net/self.html and https://www.thesap.org.uk/articles-on-jungian-psychology-2/about-analysis-and-therapy/individuation/ for explanations on the psychological concept of the Self, which in spiritual terms can equate to the Indian theological concept of the Ātman – the indwelling being of Brahman or God.

[14] See: 'The Sixties Called. They want their icons back'

at all, excepting the management seemed to feel that it perpetuated a sense of normal in what clearly were far from normal times. On many occasions I used to turn the speakers down, only to find they had been turned up again later. My relations with the two principal managers were otherwise good and they were, in the end, very understanding of my reduced circumstances and offered me a long term deal that completely vindicated those deeper reassurances not to worry, that all would be well.

Aside from brief sorties out into Tapovan along the main town highway to the different organic stores for provisions, or just a little exercise and change of scene, there was little enough to do. The first weeks of lockdown saw the emergence of an extraordinary stillness everywhere, as all construction work ceased (one of the main blights of Rishikesh that I recalled from my first visit there) and with it most traffic, so you could hear the vibrant bird life and wind in the trees. At nights vivid electric storms would light up the skies. Nature was beginning to reassert itself with images of the snow capped Himalayas visible in the Punjab for the first time in thirty years, as levels of atmospheric pollution subsided. Wild animals invaded the urban spaces with the temporary decline of people. The same stories were being told everywhere around the world, and there was a small poignant hope that if we could avoid returning to the lives we had so determinedly pursued before, a different order of natural reality might emerge and with it the chance to live in better balance with nature.

These were also the days of rampant misinformation and governmental exploitation of the global situation for the furthering of politicians' own private ends however, and the British government of the day was no exception. As people died of the mysterious virus, sometimes in apocalyptic numbers, and ordinary citizens saw their liberties so drastically curtailed that even attending funerals of loved ones became impossible, those in offices of power continued to interpret their own freedoms liberally and outside of the framework of proscriptions enforceable for the ordinary citizens. Abuses and attendant scandals blew up and raged as so many storms in the unpredictable climate of those days.

I dipped in and out of on-line world news as the impulse, curiosity and occasional ennui directed, but overall did my best to avoid it as much as possible. One of the principle aims in a Pilgrimage is to set an exclusion barrier around oneself in order to allow one's personal conditionings to unravel, exposing oneself to a different, more transcendent order

of Reality. Constantly checking world news and reading different, even if liberal or educated views upon world events was no way to do this. Instead I set myself to studying Indian theology, something I was still very hazy about despite having been given a copy of the Bhagavad Gita many years earlier and later reading a small book on Hinduism. It was to prove life changing and undoubtedly helped establish a better more informed framework for setting some of my own personal spiritual ideas and experiences into.

I even managed a small puja at the temple on the hilltop overlooking the hotel and the road, from whence issued the morning and nightly cymbals and drums. It was run by a young pandit who lived there with his mother, consisting of several small structures dedicated to the worship of different deities. I had discovered it during one of my forays up behind the hotel, and wandering into the complex through the rear, encountered the young pandit at the entrance to the temple to Durga. He had been surprised to see me, a solitary western looking woman at a time when there were fewer foreigners in the town, and no-one visiting temples. I explained my calling, recounting the tale of my most recent puja at Shooltankeshwar in Varanasi just before lockdown, and that, were it possible, I would like to be able to attend a puja at his temples. He thought about it given that all public services of worship had ceased early in the pandemic and the temples closed to pubic visits of any kind. But then he agreed, perhaps feeling that it was an opportunity to continue his craft, and that one solitary female would unlikely be a problem. We discussed the arrangements and I assured him that I had suitable attire to wear, always important when it was common place for foreigners from western secular cultures to expect to visit sacred sites wearing inappropriate clothing. In the end there were to be two pujas, another which was also attended by a young pandit friend of his, when I first experienced a fire puja.

The weeks ground slowly past and it seemed clear that, at first, Rishikesh was still virus free anyway. We were all wearing masks by then wherever we went and having our temperatures routinely scanned at public locations. Public health teams swept through conducting mass testing, but always with negative results. And then, with the first relaxation of inter-regional travel restrictions in June, people starting arriving from other parts of the country, and a group of tourists from Goa came, bringing Covid with them. Strict quarantine arrangements had to be enforced, but the hotel where the tourists stayed hadn’t enforced them, and so the virus found its way into Rishikesh. No one still knew much about it, but I had ever had the strongest feeling – related to those deeper

reassurances mentioned previously, that I wouldn't get it anyway. I still haven't as I write this, despite direct and close quarter exposure on at least one occasion.

I had moved rooms by then and was occupying another rather quieter situated towards the back end of the hotel overlooking the garden with its trees, and the restaurant. Traffic and construction work had rather inevitably resumed not long into the lockdown as people had no means to earn, so back here the noise of thundering passing vehicles was less troublesome.

I had spent around two months in the first and largest room overlooking the highway and town side, when I had expanded my knowledge of Indian theology. The second room proved to be a place of personal reflection, however, when I felt called to go deeply into my past and address the ghosts and unquiet spirits still dwelling there. So I always remember what I call the 'first room' as a place of theological study and the 'second room' as a space for deep personal introspection. The first room I had started the whole lockdown in India, where I would sit in my chair in the window and watch the sunlight and shadows move over the surrounding hills and forests, changing their colour; where I took my early meals as the restaurant had closed and only the kitchen remained open. Here I had watched the buses and coaches bear away hundreds of other stranded travellers; here I had prepared myself for the pujas at the temples on the hill nearby, dressed in my magenta and gold silk saree. In the early mornings the gardener would sweep, sweep, sweep the fallen leaves in a slow hypnotic rhythm down below, that you could meditate to. In the afternoons after lunch, the boys who worked there would gather and play cricket to pass the time.

Although ostensibly alone, I was in fact far from being so. My companion throughout was as ever the Higher Self, generally also understood as the Paramatman in Indian theology, sometimes, more specifically, as Brahman, or Shiva, or Vishnu, or one of Vishnu's incarnations, usually Krishna. In more general non-denominational religious parlance It was of course 'God', but I have always felt that 'God' was a term both too loaded and too limited for something so beyond conception, so I never felt I had to wrap It up in any of these concepts or presets and most certainly never give It a name (although I did and still do have a private way of directly addressing It). To me It was ever just 'It': the a priori of everything, the non-gendered Totality: the Ultimate or Unmanifest as both Source and Self, which nevertheless was ever my guru, guide and friend.

In the first room, as I struggled to adjust to the limitations of life, to evolve some sort of working daily routine, It was always there as the backdrop and context with a gentle feeling of always having me under close observation. There were certainly many times when I couldn't directly sense Its presence, or make that extraordinary connection that, at other times I was able to, yet I began to see these less as failings on my part, but more as times when I had to be left to work out things for myself. And you could most definitely never 'magic It up' or manifest It at will. But then It would suddenly be there again, offering some counsel, caution or encouragement; even humour on occasion. The Self most definitely does have a keen sense of this, used to high effect at times, and often I have felt that a good way to represent Its presence would be rather as the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland, who little by little disappears, leaving just its smile behind imprinted in the ether. There was (still is) a real feeling of watchful smilingness from It, and writing of my experiences of this time I realise that I have never before felt able or moved to actually describe my experience of and relationship with It. As with any very personal, private relationship, it is something I have never felt moved to share in any way and have indeed been very cautious in even referring to. After all, we live in very secular sceptical societies in western modern industrialised countries with a propensity to see people who claim to have mystical experiences and relationships with other worldly beings as either mentally ill or as part of some flaky New Age esoteric movement. Yet I am merely part of a much older and venerable tradition of Western mysticism, extending more widely into Sufi mysticism for example, which, looking at any reputable work on mysticism will readily enough confirm[15]. Reading the accounts of the early (usually Christian) mystics who describe their different and direct experiences with 'God' reassures me that I am far from alone, and that many of these renowned spiritual authorities also enjoyed a unique and rich relationship with what Wordsworth calls 'the Eternal Mind'[16].

So it was in the weeks spent in the first room, It was my guide through my spiritual musings and studies of Indian theology, whilst nevertheless reminding me periodically that I didn't in fact need any of this, given I had a direct relationship with It as the Source anyway.

[15] See e.g., Evelyn Underhill.1930 (1912) *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness.* 12th Revised Edition. E. P. Dutton. I have used this seminal work on Mysticism extensively throughout this account.

[16] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood

In the second room, as I was drawn back into more personal depth enquiries, It reverted to being my guide through the dark and difficult, abandoned places of the psyche, something I was no stranger to, because, throughout the project years living in Quito, Ecuador, I had in fact commenced the earliest stages of this work and, across the long months there, begun the process of unravelling the mysteries and hidden truths of my childhood years and the real nature of the people who were a key part of that. This was therefore to prove a broadening and deepening of those processes of enquiry already completed at a simpler level. Here also I learned that hidden truths themselves act as springs or ciphers that, when reached, open the doors to the next and hitherto hidden level, not something that mere fantasy or imagination could ever do.

About this time I had a strange and unsettling dream, where I was staring out from the balcony over the surrounding forested hills and saw a huge anthropomorphic creature leap from a tree from one side of the valley to the other. And I heard myself say “this place has become the abode of monsters”. And I knew upon wakening that this was indeed true, that the world we all dwelt in and accepted as ‘reality’ had become just that: an abode of monsters.

Another significant happening of this time saw me consciously decide to accept, embrace even, my calendar age. I have across most of my life benefitted (if you can call it that) from generally looking a lot younger than I actually am. I have never ever lied about my age, but neither would I advertise it openly either, courting that grey area betwixt and between where you could pretty much be as you wanted to be. And if anyone directly asked me how old I was (unless some legitimate official need to know) I would always reply that I was as old as the questioner thought I was, something which, if you think about it, was the most appropriate response, given people unconsciously fit their experience of you into a personal framework consisting primarily of how they see a particular age. So if they thought you were one age, then to learn you were in fact significantly older than that, they would mentally move you from one box to another, and treat you accordingly. Allied to this was dying my hair, as of many years becoming increasingly white, into a light blonde colour. Blonde is the new grey these days, so it was in fact what very many women ‘of a certain age’ did and still do. Having once started the practice it then inevitably ties you into it as actually growing it out into your natural shade is a lengthy process. Given there was

no way of finding suitable hair colourants during this period, I had tried several alternatives including chamomile and even poster paints, none of which were particularly effective. But cosmetic issues aside, more importantly I could see that I really needed to achieve a better spiritual maturity, and that artificially holding myself back at some younger age almost certainly affected this process. I needed to grow up as it were, and therefore my seventieth birthday, marked by the incident on Lakshman Jhula bridge, was the time to acknowledge and be what I actually was, and not some construct built upon worldly perceptions of youth and attractiveness. My physical body evidently went along with this, as I had started putting back on some of the weight I had lost in a strict diet earlier the previous year preparatory to leaving for India, when I had slimmed down to a slight and sylph-like fifty seven kilos. Certainly it all felt rather unsatisfactory, but I couldn't argue with my own logic. And the tight bodice of my beautiful silk saree had to be let out twice along seams already presciently stitched into it by experienced tailors who knew to allow for changes in weight over time.

I engaged in a little yoga practice, instructed by my young Brazilian friend who had in fact learned to be a yoga teacher there in the Greenhills yoga school a few years earlier. She and I would meet and talk several mornings a week, discussing spiritual matters and her own life aspirations and experiences. She also relayed to me accounts of life on the wild side of the river, where the budget hippy ashrams were and many of the remaining western tourists, for whom the pandemic and attendant restrictions never seemed to present any limitations on socialising or partying. It sometimes felt as though we were living in different worlds, until the day a particularly wild beach party beside the river was raided by police and the ravers arrested. The price for release had been either a large monetary fine or having to return to old fashioned school days of 'lines', writing out several hundred times "I am a selfish ignorant person and do not care about the welfare of others" or words to that effect!

Drugs, more especially hashish, were widely used and everywhere available if you knew where to look. It had early on struck me how the cannabis plant marijuana itself grew everywhere anyway, earning its nickname of 'weed', that India was famous for and that Shiva yogis in particular used to support their spiritual practices. Across the course of the summer the proscriptions on movement slowly eased, and come June a wider array of businesses could open up, including cafes. I remember the morning when I first

discovered the Divine Bakery Café along Lakshman Jhula road and tentatively went in the enjoy my first serious coffee for months, taken outside on the terrace overlooking the river, with no one else there. It felt like a blossoming of the first buds of summer.

With the gradual relaxation of the strict lockdown rules and travel with it, a sense of normality slowly resumed. International travel would take far longer to recover, but visitors from farther afield like Delhi starting appearing once more at Greenhills, and eventually I was asked to move rooms again, to one smaller, given the second room I had occupied across the summer was actually family sized. I went out walking more along the surrounding roads into the hills, and enjoyed my occasional visits to Divine Bakery Café, where I was generally the only client sitting out on the terrace. One of the two hotel managers, Keith, whose father had inspired the whole sixties theme – being a lover of the genre as a teenager himself, even to naming his two sons after sixties rock band singers, took me on his motorcycle into Rishikesh itself, speeding along the main road winding by the broad sparkling river, with the sun in my face and wind in my hair. It felt like some amazing adventure and escape to suddenly be free to travel outside of the limits of Tapovan where I had been per force grounded and inactive for six long months. But better was soon to follow.

Journeys with Sahdev

Come September and the gradual change in light and shift towards autumn, another shift in my own life was heralded that was to make a lasting impact upon me, and reveal that the long empty inactivity of the summer months had been a mere preparation for. It happened prosaically enough, through the offices of Annie, the French artist and co long term guest at Greenhills, who had spent her lockdown drinking expresso coffees in reception when she wasn't working upon a corpus of original abstract designs. I ran into her at reception one day having just returned from Gangotri, a place I hadn't even heard about until then. I remember the clear twinge of a combination of shock and, yes, envy, that she had managed what had until then eluded me – escape into the countryside from the confines of Tapovan. She was expansively expressive in her very French manner, with limited command of English, gesturing instead the sheer wonder and vastness of the mountainscapes she had recently returned from seeing. It stunned me when I learned this

and I quizzed her how she had managed this at such a time, whereupon it emerged that a local man called Sahdev had been her guide and driver whom she often travelled with, even more recently across the summer, making occasional trips into the foothills to his family's village and location of a small Hindu temple where a holy man lived. With the recent opening up of inter-regional travel, the mountains had at last become accessible, having been closed over the long lockdown period; indeed since the previous November and first winter snows. Sahdev had apparently been her courier across many years, even as far as trips into Pakistan, and Annie was fulsome in her of praise of him. I wasted no time in arranging to meet him too. And so I came to make one of my most significant contacts and friendships, certainly of these most recent years.

We initially met in the restaurant garden and I explained my interests to him. He was a short, stocky, pleasant looking man of middle years, with moderate English. It was agreed that he take me to his village initially, where Annie herself had been wont to visit sometimes over the summer, and see how I got on with him as driver, before I attempted a longer more demanding journey. So this was duly arranged for the following weekend.

If the motorbike excursion into Rishikesh had felt like a great adventure and escape, it was nothing to the feeling of climbing into his car and heading off out of Tapovan in the opposite direction along the Badrinath Road. The pretty forested foothills with the turquoise river flowing through them, opened up on every side. The drive itself must have taken forty minutes or so, and eventually we left the main highway and cut into the hills, along winding backwoods lanes, passing other small local settlements, until eventually we reached his village, and the small Shiva temple on its outskirts where the holy man (baba) lived. Early on our excursion we stopped at a local ashram located along the river bank and place considered sacred for meditation, a cave of some sort, but it was, as were many places, still closed to public visits. But here it was that I saw my first hoopoe bird, as we walked down the steps towards the river and the ashram. I had never seen one before, but recalled their spiritual symbolic significance from the famous medieval Sufi text 'Conference of Birds'[17], and I felt it must be very significant in some way. Certainly my deeper psyche must have felt this too, as one night I had had a very numinous dream where I had seen a white hoopoe high in a tree.

[17] There are many translations and editions of this famous work of early Persian literature dating to the 12th century. See for e.g., Farid Attar. 1984. *The Conference of Birds.* Penguin *Classics.* See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Conference_of_the_Birds

Sahdev periodically recounted me with tales of Annie along the way, and how she would love to be set down at some point and walk for a kilometre or so to meet him further up the road, but I felt no such inclination and rather wished that regular Annie related anecdotes didn't have to be part of our conversational dynamics in this way. Women and fellow artists as we were, and long term guests across the lockdown at Greenhills, we were nevertheless also and clearly very different too. At the beginning, Sahdev and I knew one another little enough, so I imagine he felt it was a sort of ice breaker and mediator, but I have never been someone to need or enjoy small talk and generally relish the opportunity for silence and simply being at peace and one with my environment, and more especially now when the chance to break out from the limitations of life in lockdown Tapovan across six long months and enjoy the space, scenery and peace of the countryside needed to be experienced as fully as possible.

The visit to the baba was to be the first of several over several years to see this extraordinary man, who seemed to radiate peace and light from his slight, slim and ageless frame. I understood from Sahdev that he had lived there for some twenty five years when originally there had just been a deep underground cave in a rock, and that across the years he had single handedly constructed the temple that now appeared to grow up out of the rock and underground cave it was a part of. The view across the surrounding hills and valley was green and expansive, framed with magenta bougainvilleas, with long curvaceous lines of agricultural terraces that were the common means for managing the mountain environment for cultivation. The baba had a pet macaque monkey kept most of the time in a large cage, which he had rescued as an orphan infant and which now looked to him as its parent; other than Sahdev, who the monkey also loved (animals as a generality, regardless of species, loved Sahdev, as he did them). Sahdev would play extravagantly with the monkey through the cage bars, but I understood that it was unwise to try and do the same, given the species in general has a reputation for aggression and this one was likely no exception with strangers.

The baba cooked us a simple rice and vegetable dish which to me at that time tasted divine, like some special dish from an exclusive restaurant. And I was happy just to sit on the grass outside the temple and gaze at the hills and terraces and breathe the deep sweet air and feel in my heart that stranger more mystical experiences were now

presenting upon the liminal boundaries of my hitherto limited world. I made a small private puja at the little temple with the few offerings I had, and eventually we departed, the baba smiling expansively at us like light shining out from behind clouds.

Back in the confines of Tapovan and arriving finally into Greenhills, Sahdev revealed the other characteristic that I have ever struggled with across my time of knowing him, which was never to tell you directly what to pay him. He would just say “whatever you want”. Possibly in some weird way it was a distant cousin to my “whatever you think I am” in answer to questions about my age, but I found it maddening, given I had no idea whatever what the going tariffs were in that part of the world. My normal response would have been to have paid the going rate plus a little extra, but as it was I fluctuated wildly between the excessively generous and falling very short. And although he always claimed it didn’t matter, you could generally tell if you had paid too little, given his expression. I understand that this was, of course, his living his life according to the Sanatarma Dharma ethos, as he was a member of the Kriya Yoga ashram and lived his life in accordance with Hindu beliefs, and he was most certainly a very honest and ethical man, believing profoundly in building good karma for himself by not prioritising money over other more spiritually directed goals. In the end, an awkward sort of modus operandi evolved between us which allowed us to continue, but it was never easy for me. It also of necessity pushed one back onto one’s own morality, a sort of knife edge formed of knowledge of one’s own financial limitations and notions of value for money, and yet also respect for needing to acknowledge the good services of another honestly, and, if possible, generously. As I said, it would have worked better if I had had a better idea of the going rates for taxi fares.

Gangotri

The next excursion was to be the big one, and one that I felt rather nervous about. I had managed the sortie out to see the baba at his temple, overall lasting a short few hours, but the proposed visit to Gangotri was to be for three days in total and I wondered if I would be able to deal with it. A lifelong traveller, I had been so grounded over the six months of the lockdown that I had become normalised to living differently, with skills to endure long sedentary hours indoors, and certainly not the challenges of a long car journey with someone I still barely knew, or putting up at different guest houses. This also coincided

with a period when I became increasingly more mystically receptive. The long emptiness of the days, the immersion in spiritual literature, the immersion within my own deeper self, the sustained exposure to the Higher Self and Its own influences on my deeper psyche and cognitive processes, had all served to open up those receptive centres. I was not a stranger to this, as I had certainly experienced it before, at different key stages across my life, most notably during the period I had lived in Quito between 2017 and 2018.

I prepared meticulously for the trip, which was a week or so after the visit to the baba, coinciding with a full harvest moon on 1st October, itself seeming auspicious. I sat on the balcony outside my room and gazed at the golden waxing gibbus phased moon through the long rustling leaves of the tall garden palm trees set against the deep blue night sky and wondered where and what the next days would bring. Because these preparations involved a stark confrontation with the prevailing belief that this trip was to involve a death of some description; my own death. I wasn't certain how I should see this other than in the tarot arcana manner of the Death card representing the ending of a major life stage and beginning of another. But I also had to allow space for the possibility that it could mean the real thing too. So I organised my very few belongings and clothing carefully against the eventuality that I might not return. And I also warned those I had been in intermittent touch with in the UK that I would go out of radar contact, and not access the internet, let alone email.

We were set to leave early the following morning before the sun was well risen and I stood out on the road clad in the new warmer clothing I had been advised to get for the journey given the colder temperatures at higher altitudes. Sahdev drew up in his white car and we loaded up and off we set, pursuing the highway beyond Tapovan in the direction of Rishikesh, before striking off in the direction of Dehradun and onwards towards the mountains. It was a road I had known many months earlier as it also led in the direction of the airport and stretched through a long tract of protected forest where elephants and tigers roamed.

Sahdev made brave attempts to make conversation to lighten the journey, with lively accounts of his other passengers, but I wasn't game for it in any way, needing my peace and the opportunity to deeply engage with myself. Given the intermittent mystical states that prevailed I was also experiencing nausea and had brought raw ginger with me to

chew to the alleviate the symptoms, so my mouth felt uncomfortable and fiery for most of the journey anyway. I had long learned that nausea and light headedness was an unpleasant side effect of altered states of consciousness and understood this to indicate the parasympathetic nervous system was particularly highly activated, a sort of intermediary between ordinary world and mystical realities. Looking back on this first journey and the way I was, I am surprised that Sahdev ever wanted anything to do with me after it. I was not good company, certainly not the usual polite, sociable and seemingly patient person that I normally was, so his different conversation attempts met with silence or brusque responses.

It was a long journey of some ten hours in all, navigating roads only recently opened up to more general traffic, and everywhere there were risks of police check points with mandatory Covid tests required, and details of your journey itinerary. We managed to escape most of these, excepting at Uttarkashi, a large regional market town in Uttarakhand on the banks of the Ganges, where we were required to drive off the road to a make shift medical facility in a large sprawling car park. Being it was lunch time the medics were off duty, so after hanging around in the heat, we decided to leave and risk the consequences. But we were never stopped again.

The entire route was defined by the river, cutting steeply through the mountains, with every advance in altitude marked by a slow change in the vegetation, from the dryer forests of the lower foothills I was used to in Rishikesh, into the tall elegant Himalayan spruces that adorned the mountain slopes at the higher elevations. For a long way our journey took us past the immense New Tehri dam, a vast hydrological construction that had drowned huge areas and swallowed several villages to create a reservoir of Ganges water to supply a catchment down to Delhi. The first time I saw it it was relatively full, the final time in 2024 depleted, with little water remaining. We would stop off occasionally for chai teas and light meals of dhal or parathas. It was casual country fare with casual roadside etiquette too, so of necessity you had to get used to your parathas – freshly made, hot and tasty as they always were being handed to you literally in the hands of the restaurant staff. Outside of Rishikesh and on the road, few people seemed to care for wearing the face masks, although Sahdev did so religiously and said he even wore one when sleeping if he didn’t feel confident in his surroundings. I had started the journey with a mask, but then abandoned it, finding it impossible to breathe and manage the nausea. It felt a little risky

and possibly irresponsible too, but discussing it Sahdev he seemed sanguine enough and evidently felt that I wasn't a risk.

Stopping for a brief pause of journey, still by the Tehri dam and a chance to enjoy the expansive views, I experienced my first profound mystical vision of that journey (there were to be more) as I looked out across the mountain slopes with their forests and the vast glittering turquoise reservoir between the road and the sky. Through tears (mystical states can induce emotional ones) and waves of nausea, I briefly apprehended the Oneness of everything, myself as a part of this. It was as though something fused inside my being, and everything – the multiplicity of perceived reality – became what it actually was (is) – a one of something. This wasn't (couldn't have been) imagined in any way and is in fact one of the mystical revelatory states sought in the spiritual pathways such as the Advaita Vedanta Patanjali's Sutras or in the famous Shaivite Recognition Sutras[18]. I had last had one way back in Kochi at my little homestay, in the garden by the fish pond there, when, working on a small drawing, I had a spontaneous shift in consciousness and experienced myself as the Self, with no effort, cognitive or otherwise. It hadn't lasted long, a few brief minutes, but in it I had known without any question that I was actually 'That' (as with 'Thou art That'[19]) because I experienced that state of being first hand, an essential requirement of any visionary revelation of Truth.

We continued, climbing ever higher, and the road became narrower and more tortuous, bending back continually on itself like some fairground ride and horrible to experience when you are smitten with motion sickness anyway. But the views, when I was able to glimpse them, were beyond sublime, so awesome and beautiful that they almost hurt the heart to see them. I mean that in the sense that beauty of such an order can pierce you like a blade with itself, with its I am Thatness if you like. Eventually, exhausted and bone weary, we drew into the small roadside settlement and Himalayan village Dharali, long extolled by Sahdev as being the one place on the road (but nevertheless and importantly still off it) where you could reach the river by foot, and here we were to stop for the night. I was later to stay in the real village last year, set up off the road and formed of a nucleation

[18] There are many versions and editions of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. See for example: Gary Kissiah. 2011. *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali-Illuminated* (Second Edition) Lilalabs Publishing LLC, 2011
Rajanaka Ksemaraja 2017. *The Recognition Sutras.* Translated by Christopher D. Wallis. Mattamayura Press. Bouldet CO

[19] "Thou Art That" is considered one of the 'great sayings of the Upanishads. See for example https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mah%C4%81v%C4%81kyas

of traditional Himalayan houses, barns and courtyards where the local people lived. Wayside Dharali was a much more recent development consisting of small stores, eateries and hotels which had evolved as a transit stop off, originally for pilgrims to and from Gangotri, then for the swelling trekking business; to now when it seems solely to provision the thousands of urban trippers from the surrounding provinces of the whole of northern India and cities like Delhi, intent on nothing more than site seeing.

As we arrived outside of the little hotel where Sahdev had planned for us to stay, well known to him from his many previous trips, the first major hiccup of the journey manifested in that the recent opening up to wider travel had resulted in several more families also being at there, when he had confidently assured me that we'd have the place to ourselves, as had been the case when he had taken Annie there recently: no noise, no TVs, no other loud guests with swarms of children running everywhere; just the hotel family and the few Himalayan dogs that lived outside on the street. Tired, cold and very dispirited by now, I selected a room different to the one offered me (it had been overlooking the street anyway) at the back of the building to discover that the bathroom hadn't in fact been cleaned since the previous year given the entire operation had closed with the oncoming of winter then and only just reopened. The toilet bowl in particular was indescribable. I still feel sorry for Sahdev thinking back on this time given he had tried so hard to assure everything would be good for me. Defensively he drew upon his main experience of western female travellers to assure me that Annie had never minded these things anyway, she could sleep in whatever was on offer as she had when they'd been there earlier, and make do with cold water to wash in, which, effete as evidently I still am in many ways, I couldn't. Annie however had also loved peace and quiet as I do, but not even this was possible given the presence of the families, the sound of TVs blaring along the corridor and people talking loudly everywhere.

The manager of the hotel was a nice man however, known to Sahdev over years and he ordered the toilet cleaned and as much additional provision as possible, though I had to use the adjacent room's bathroom to wash given the geyser in mine wasn't functioning. But at least there was in the end hot water for the customary bucket showers in this part of the world and a general refreshing of body and spirit. Thus far it was still an adventure and part of the necessary Pilgrimage experience, to suffer the trials of the journey, a stripping

away of the outer conditioned layers of the personality and an opening up to the spiritual possibilities that lay now much closer, winking on the liminal boundaries of my world.

Sahdev, known to sleep overnight in his car if needed, was happily able to use one of the still free rooms. He was well known and welcome in these parts, so not short of society. The whole region had only very recently opened up anyway, so everywhere and everyone still had that patina of strangeness. The villagers in the mountains had closed themselves off for long months, fearful of the virus and suspicious of anyone from outside, but Sahdev as ever was able to circumnavigate these unseen boundaries. He disappeared after ensuring I was ok and reappeared later when I came down to take a light supper of the now customary dhal, rice and vegetables. We had actually arrived late in the afternoon, so I had been able to rest and recover a little, but I passed on his suggestion that we go out and down to the ancient temple on the river bank just across the road, deciding I had had enough for the day. It was coming well into autumn by then and everywhere was full of the apples the higher Himalayan regions are known for. Last year, finally, I was able to coincide with the springtime apple blossoms when I stayed in Dharali for a month over May and see the start of the cycle, with cuckoos included.

The night was predictably very cold, but the bedding warm enough and I made it through to the morning between episodes of my customary insomnia. It felt very strange to be up here at all, after the long protracted period down in Rishikesh. The village was surrounded by tall rugged peaks on every side, and a tributary of the Bhagirathi river rushed noisily past the hotel, so you could hear it throughout the night like a perpetual rainstorm. In the dawn, clouds above the high peaks turned red and then gold with the advancing sunrise, lighting the ranks of dark spruces that clustered the slopes, and the distant mountain glaciers emerged vividly from their brooding nighttime gloom.

After breakfast and the first of many warming sweet and spicy chai teas, we prepared to leave to drive the twenty five kilometres further to Gangotri itself, where the source of the Ganges, then as the Bhagirathi river, pours off the Gangotri Glacier at some 4,300 metres of altitude. Hindu mythology portrays it as the Goddess Ganga emerging from the matted locks of Lord Shiva at his eternal abode on Mount Kailash. I had by then decided that I could only deal with staying an additional night, rather than the three originally planned, so the itinerary had to be adjusted accordingly. As a lifelong habituate of the Andean regions,

at least in Ecuador, it was sobering to come up so quickly on my own personal limitations. I had last been in higher colder elevations during the fieldwork stages of my erstwhile University project, when I had lived in Quito and regularly visited the Indigenous mountain communities to carry out a survey of their ancestral healing customs and beliefs, so the high Himalayas shouldn't perhaps have presented the challenge to me they did, were it not for the long sedentary months in Greenhills and Tapovan over the lockdown and its associated comforts.

By now I was fairly constantly immersed in a transcendent, mystically receptive state, needing to preserve my space and solitude whilst nevertheless being sufficiently sociable with Sahdev who, not knowing me then or understanding my deeper needs, could be forgiven for seeing it as part of his duty to regale me with information and stories of the region and people, and experiences of his other passengers. He had, after all, made this trip many times. The drive took us higher and higher along the mountain road with its sweeping scenic beauty offering periodic glimpses of the river, now narrow and steeply cutting through tall cliffs on either side. I was reminded in some ways of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings descriptions of Middle Earth. I had never seen anything that came close to what I was seeing now, even in South America. Kindred in geological age as they are and both 'young' in terms of mountains, the Andes and the Himalayas nevertheless present very differently in terms of their landforms.

We arrived and parked some distance from the temple entrance, approached along a narrow pedestrian street of small guest houses and eateries which were already starting to fill up with the renewed influx of visitors, anxious to see the famous Char Dam destination before it was closed once more for the winter the following month. It was a bright sunny day and not particularly cold, so I was able to wear a light dress with pashmina, rather than thermals. Inside the temple complex, the presiding brahmin performed the rituals and administered customary ochre marks to my forehead in return for offerings made at the shrine, otherwise I felt no particular desire to roam around much, but sat instead in the sunshine close to the river as it rushed noisily past, taking it all in. Sahdev had brought large plastic containers to fill with Ganges water, as had many of the other visitors there. Returning, we stopped off at a crowded little café along the pedestrian street for samosas and chai, before continuing back to Dharali. At a spot on one of the bridges across the young Bhagirathi where we halted briefly for me to enjoy the scenery at leisure, I gazed

mesmerised in wonder at the extravagant beauty before me, feeling humbled as with some religious experience. It was a sublime afternoon by then, when the colours seemed particularly vivid and in the distance over all towered the snow-capped Gangotri glacier against a clear cerulean blue sky, the steep mountain sides clad with their spruce forests, climbing rank upon rank. I felt my heart pierced once more by its beauty, and almost couldn't raise my eyes more than briefly to look at it. It was like a sacred vision, yet real for all that, and there was something both so vividly real yet transcendent about it that burned itself into me like a branding iron, forever marking my soul with itself. Later, strangely, aptly, the words and music to the early 70s song 'Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)' spontaneously came to mind, as though from the smiling Self Itself, to consecrate my experience.

Back in Dharali I rested awhile in my room, but later that afternoon Sahdev took me down to the small beach past the ancient Kalp Kedar Shiva temple, which he had told me about several times, one of the few places where you could actually reach the river by foot. Sadhus often stayed in a small hut along the way, and there were clear signs of ritual activity on the beach where people had piled small round pebbles and boulders in little mounds, Zen style. There, too, someone had recently drawn in the white river sand an immense heart, with a smaller heart contained within, which immediately called to mind the verse in the Bhagavad Gita: "Then thou shall see all things in thy heart, and thou shall see thy heart in me"[20].

Sahdev left me to ponder the views in peace, taking himself off to perch on top of one of the large river boulders further up the beach, evidently in his happy spot. I have seen him there on the several returns trips made since, as he says the energy is very good there, which I can well believe. Here the smaller tributary river running past the village higher up joins with the Bhagirathi, and the Gangotri glacier glitters, if more distantly, beyond.

The noise and traffic back up on the road seemed remote here, and instead I heard the jingling of a distant mule train the other side of the river, headed towards the narrow suspension bridge further along where you could cross to the other side. Taking it all in, once again I had the same experience as I had had the previous day, of a fusion of the multiplicity of things into the vision of a one of something, including me as viewer of it. The

[20] *The Bhagavad Gita.* Translated by Juan Mascaró. Penguin Classics

experience brought with it an expansive feeling of reassurance and peace, a sublime transcendence. This, I decided, was ‘Prakriti’ – the Manifest Totality – which matched an earlier, much more profound inward vision of the Unmanifest Itself that I had had back in Quito in October of 2017; something so annihilating in its affect upon me that even now I find it impossible to describe[21]. Sahdev returned to find me mopping my eyes again, so I’m not surprised he formed the view that I was deeply unhappy with the trip and never likely to want to return, as I later learned!

The vision and peace that came with the vision endured through the night, and I had a wonderful ‘connective’ meditation before sleeping. The following morning we were due to leave at dawn to make the long return journey back to Rishikesh, but an unexpected fault with the car delayed us for over an hour until Sahdev was able to resolve it. Normally I would have been anxious and impatient, but as it was, I was able to keep a sense of detachment and waited in the restaurant open to the street, watching as he struggled to fix the problem. And then I noticed a hoopoe bird perched on a balcony on the opposite side of the street, preening itself in the early morning sunshine. As I watched, it took wing and flew straight past me in a wide loop. It seemed, as the first time a few days earlier, to denote something deeply significant and relevant to my spiritual journey, marking the visions I had had there, and I was happy to have seen it.

Car fault eventually resolved, we departed and made our way back, arriving into Rishikesh in the late afternoon after the customary drive of several hours. My room was waiting as I had left it, but here I was in the flesh again. I had not died in the manner I half thought I would, but nevertheless there had been an immense change of some order, and I still felt I had passed some invisible but critical boundary.

Badrinath

I was to make two further trips with Sahdev after this: to Badrinath and then Kedarnath, both important pilgrimage destinations on the Chota Char Dam pilgrimage route in the Himalayas with beautiful ancient temples. Both had also very recently opened up, but were very shortly to close again for the winter, so time was of the order. It was getting increasingly colder in Rishikesh by then and I needed to start using a room heater. I had

[21] I include a description in the essay “In Defence of faith”. See above.

moved to the third and final room at Greenhills shortly after returning from Gangotri, still with little idea of my longer term plans, but after recovering from the visit to Gangotri, I began to feel the calling to make another similar, so I contacted Sahdev again, who was clearly surprised to hear from me at all. He said he had formed the view that I would never ever want to travel with him again given how I had been on the first journey! So it was agreed that we go to Badrinath, location of the famous multi colour façade temple to Vishnu, although further away even than Gangotri, not far from the border with China. We started out on 10th October, a week following our return from Gangotri. The journey turned out to be even longer and more arduous than the first, given the entire road was then in the process of being resurfaced, making it dreadful to drive on, also with the customary road blocks and demands for documentation and Covid tests, but we again made it through without delay or incident and Sahdev said he believed that I was protected by the temple Deity. It certainly felt that way.

We eventually arrived into Badrinath after nightfall and drove to the one small hotel that Sahdev knew, which was already rather full with other pilgrims taking advantage of the recent opening up. It was really quite cold by now and I had little enthusiasm for stripping off in the damp icy bathroom to wash. We went out to eat at a small roadside kitchen, crowded closely with other people, which made me feel nervous given it was still the days of Covid and you were supposed to be keeping your distance and wearing a face mask, neither of which protocols were in evidence here. Then we walked down into the town and looked at the shimmering view of the floodlit temple across the river, shining through the blackness. The town was still very alive with market stalls and people everywhere, and I was able to buy a grey wool blanket, typical of the region, which would hopefully keep me warmer that night in bed.

Bleary eyed dawn duly arrived after a cold, restless and itchy night, consequent on the coarse wool of the blanket with teasles embedded in it, like some medieval hair shirt. I forced myself up in the icy room and outside to look at the first sun rays striking the glacial heights of the mountain overlooking us, and the corrugated iron roofs of the surrounding dwellings. Other guests were also up and about, preparing for their visit to the temple. Sahdev, who had said he'd be sleeping on a blanket in reception, was nowhere to be seen, so I strolled back down the street to the small roadside kitchen for a wakeup chai and paratha. Encountering Sahdev on my way back he seemed stunned that I had been

able to make shift for myself, evidently having formed the view that I was helpless. It took us awhile to establish the familiarity that we eventually did, so these early days were perhaps inevitably influenced by the first trip to Gangotri and the way I had been then.

Walking back through town down to the temple, it was soon evident that hundreds of other pilgrims were headed there too, and the queue along the path and up the steps to the temple entrance was daunting given the need to be so proximate to everyone else and the risks of infection. Writing this now several years later it is perhaps too easy to forget the ever present sense of threat then to exposure to a newly emergent virus still so little understood and still wreaking havoc across the world. Now, with the eventual emergence of less virulent and dangerous strains, no-one ever bothers and you are regularly hearing of people with Covid; the chance of death or long term disablement has greatly receded.

The river wound closely past the temple where there were public washing facilities for pilgrims to undertake ritual cleansing before visiting the sanctum. I felt disinclined to join the long queue of devotees and had decided it might be better to pass on making the puja altogether, when Sahdev suddenly met a young guy who was known to him as a tour guide, standing on the steps close by. It then emerged that there was in fact another less obtrusive temple entrance higher up to one side which people often exited through, and the guide suggested it was worth seeing if we could get in there. Sahdev has a real gift of sweet talking given his congenial, amenable manner (his belligerent side is reserved for folk who he sees as trashy, ignorant and uncaring of nature and good manners). Arriving at the little hidden portal, he explained my predicament and, casting a dubious eye over me, the gate guard let us through. I wasn't able to wear the ornate temple saree for those visits given the privation of travel and circumstances, but had at least my ornate hand embroidered Kashmiri pashmina bought the previous year in Rishikesh. As ever, I was the only foreigner in evidence, but I never again encountered the hostility I had at the start of the year at Guruvayur. I was ushered towards the steps of the sanctum, where I knelt to make my prayers and offerings, and the presiding priest administered the ochre forehead mark and handed to me flowers from another offering, as was customary. And then I was free to relax in the sunshine and take in the vibrant scene evolving around me. A traditional mode of transport from earlier times, persisting still to the present, was the palanquin, a rush woven basket carried on the back of a courier to transport the infirm and aged, and I watched as a courier arrived into the courtyard carrying what appeared to be an aged

brahmin on his back, and set him down carefully. They had arrived, finally, at the goal of the old man's journey, and chance to worship at the altar of this famed ancient temple. I was struck by the expression on the old pilgrim's face, his beatific smile which shone with a kind of light, the sort of light I only occasionally saw and last with the baba at the temple close to Sahdev's village.

Sahdev had his own agenda during these visits and took the opportunity to make his private respects whenever able and moved to do so, so his encouragement to me to stay as long as I wanted I interpreted as his needing time for himself. But eventually we left, exiting through the same side gate and then walked on along narrow old back streets looking for somewhere to eat. Heading eventually back towards town and the hotel, we passed a small pagoda across the river from the temple where several sadhus were seated by a warming blaze. Rather untypically they were wearing white and then, from beneath the robes of one, two small white puppies emerged to play by the fireside. It was such a beautiful scene, and at such times I found it hard not to regret my decision never to take photos on these sacred journeys. Certainly it would have made a very striking and beautiful picture.

Back from Badrinath I had time to process the experience. It wasn't quite as striking perhaps as the first trip to Gangotri with no special transcendent moments, although the whole visit had certainly served some important purpose. The closing in of the winter and increasing cold, together with the influx of so many other pilgrims changed the energy and Badrinath itself is simply a small Himalayan market town grown up around the temple to serve the needs of the pilgrims, but with otherwise no special claims to fame or heritage. The scenery along the highway from Rishikesh was also of a very different and starker order, barren in many regions, when the road up to Gangotri was very green with the spruce forests and rushing mountain cascades everywhere, adorned over all by the shimmering snow-capped peaks. October was advancing towards November, and I still had no onward plans, until I decided that I should round off these sacred visits with a trip up to Kedarnath, one of the four Chota Char Dham yatra locations with an ancient Shiva temple over 1000 years old. It had also just recently opened, and the recent innovation of a helicopter shuttle made it accessible to the many people who would otherwise be unable to go, given it is a 17 kilometre trek on foot or horse back to get there otherwise. In some

ways it felt a little like cheating, taking the easy way out, but by then for a number of reasons the long foot trek, or even pony back, was beyond me.

Kedarnath

It was midweek, the 21st of October when we started out at dawn, initially taking the Badrinath road again and after the long drive, we eventually arrived at the final destination village of Triyuginarayan, the last point accessible by road. From here you would then have to trek on foot or horse back the rest of the way up to Kedarnath temple itself. Whenever I think back to that day, I see in my mind's eye the large beautiful hawk moth, with its intricate black and white markings, that came to visit me as I sat at the landing pad of the shuttle waiting my turn in the next helicopter. And I remember what it felt like, after the puja of worship at the temple altar, to sit in the quadrangle watching the scene, the line of other pilgrims waiting their turn at the temple portal, the surrounding mountain peaks becoming daily more white with their mantle of snow, and hear the lilting chanting of the mantras of worship to the Shivalinga, echoing around the peaks. And feeling so deeply in my heart that I had 'arrived'; that the long journey of Pilgrimage in search of that transcendent 'something' had reached an end, even if perhaps just an end for that stage of it.

We only stayed a night on the journey in total, making it to the high town Triyuginarayan[22] early enough in the day to visit the temple there, renowned from legend as being where Shiva and Parvati were married, overseen by Vishnu in attendance. There had been a fire burning continuously in the deep ancient firepit for several hundred years to mark the occasion, and as we wandered around the temple complex, a small group of army officers turned up and requested a special fire puja to be made for them. Sahdev persuaded them to let me join them in the ceremony, so I was able to be there too and participate in much the way that I last had in the small hilltop temple in Rishikesh a few months earlier, with the fire puja there. Leaving the temple and town, we then drove on to where I could get the shuttle to Kedarnath high temple itself. Sahdev declined my offer to join me on the trip, but was clearly very keen that I go myself. He said he would wait for me back in the village

[22] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triyuginarayan_Temple

and when I returned we would then find somewhere to stay for the night before making the long drive back to Rishikesh.

I had just missed one flight and sat waiting on the pad for it to return, and as I did so, I had an extraordinary visitation in the form of a large beautiful hawk moth, with intricate black and white markings, which landed on my colourful pashmina, evidently attracted to what must have seemed like flowers, as you could see its long curled proboscis probing the embroidered designs. And then the helicopter reappeared on the skyline bringing back pilgrims from the high temple. The waiting area had filled up by then with other passengers, and I felt a twinge of anxiety about the flight arrangement given the requirement to wear face masks in public areas and keep a safe distance, but, after we were packed into the passenger space of the aircraft, six of us in total, everyone then immediately removed their masks and started talking, as if the threat had suddenly disappeared, which of course it hadn't. It was once of those many occasions when you were thrown back on the ground of faith, given best plans and protocols had proved futile.

I had never been in a helicopter before (and haven't since), so I was excited at the novel experience, so different to any aeroplane. The flight was a mere ten minutes, but took us up and over some of the highest peaks to reach Kedarnath township, with breathtaking scenery. It was a short walk up to the temple from the helipad, crossing first the Mandakini river and then along a broad avenue lined with small guest houses and stalls selling memorabilia and temple puja sets for pilgrims to buy. I wasn't exactly sure what to expect, so just followed my nose in the direction of where I could see the temple in the distance against the backdrop of mountains. Coming eventually into the open forecourt, I was immediately besieged by speculative officiates, touting their services to help you perform a pre temple visit puja. Whenever I had done these visits before I had generally brought my own offerings with incense sticks, flowers, fruit and spices or perfume oil, but given I had had little idea what to expect here, I had nothing suitable with me, so although I felt disinclined to go along with instant pop-up pujas in this way, I succumbed in the end, feeling it was likely better than not. The officiate quickly went through the protocols outside the temple entrance with chants and I paid him the required fee and then joined the queue of devotees waiting to enter.

The whole surroundings to the snow-capped peaks echoed to the mesmeric chanting of mantras adoring the Shivalinga, broadcast from temple loud speakers. The queue moved steadily forward until I was ushered into the dim sanctum with its altar, pungent with smoky incense, surrounded by large hanging brass bells, to kneel and make my worship and offering of flowers that I had brought. One never really knows what to say at these times as all words are redundant anyway, but I burbled something about giving myself several times. It was inevitably difficult to take it all in, to be both present in the moment as well as observant of that moment, until I found myself quickly ushered out of a side portal and into the sunshine again and it was all over. The high point, literally, had been over in a moment, but, as with any a fertilisation, itself seemingly instantaneous – the vivifying of new life – the repercussions were, are, immeasurable.

I moved off to a bench at the side of the forecourt and gave myself time to take the whole scene in and it was one of the few times I allowed myself to make a brief video clip. Off to one side sat a group of sadhus by a fire, dressed in the characteristic manner that sadhus often do – elaborate and individualistic in their colourful robes, dreadlocks, but sometimes with unconventional head wear and even John Lennon style ‘shades’. Otherwise there were just the pilgrims lining up outside the temple, and those who had done their pujas, emerging out again and meandering around much in the way I was. There was a distinct sense that something profound had changed, that I had ‘arrived’. The long pilgrimage with its open uncertainties felt like it had, finally, come to an end, although what might lay after I had no clear indication of; it was all still too early anyway.

Eventually I returned to the helipad and got my ticket for the next flight back. I found Sahdev at a guesthouse opposite the shuttle offices where we’d agreed to meet, and so we started the journey home to Rishikesh, stopping a night at a roadside hotel along the way. Approaching the high view over the Ganges above Rishikesh in the distance, I had the strangest feeling in me, that I knew then moksha – ‘enlightenment’. It was a luminous transcendent feeling that sets you apart from life and its travails in a magical space. Moksha is a space, a place, possibly best described thus, by the Sufi master, Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī :

> “Beyond Islam and unbelief there is a ‘desert plain.’ For us, there is a ‘passion’ in the midst of that expanse. The knower [of God] who reaches there will prostrate [in prayer]. (For) there is neither Islam nor unbelief, nor any ‘where’ (in) that place.” [23]

Arriving finally into Greenhills, I knew it was time, finally, to make plans to return to the UK. I had no idea exactly what lay after that, but it did seem that the extraordinary Pilgrimage year 2020, when I had so immeasurably expanded my self-knowledge and self-experience, and had touched, even if briefly, the heights of spiritual vision, was over and that something different would now be required of me. I arranged for one final end of Pilgrimage puja of thanksgiving at the Virbhadra Temple to Shiva in Rishikesh, burned my saree and threw the ashes into the Ganges from the Lakshman Jhula bridge. Nearly four weeks later in November, I took a cab back to Delhi and boarded a flight back to the UK, only a week short of the anniversary of my leaving for India the previous year.

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[23] Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī https://www.quora.com/What-did-Rumi-mean-when-he-said-Beyond-right-and-wrong-there-is-a-field-I-will-meet-you-there. Correct translation by Islamic scholar Mohamad Ramadan.

Part Two.
Nepal and Muktinath

From India to York and from York to Nepal

When my year in India eventually ended in November 2020, I returned to the UK and to York, a town I have lived in on and off for many years. I would be there, it transpired, until June the following year owing to mandatory coronavirus restrictions which had closed borders and limited international travel, both in the UK and Nepal, the country I had felt called to travel to as the next stage of my journey. The time spent there seemed surreal enough given ‘normal life’ was still hugely restricted by the ongoing pandemic and in some ways therefore I was buffered from the too great a shock of being thrown back head first into the world I had left in 2019. Everything had changed. So had I and it was probably inevitably difficult to work out how I should proceed in the wake of those long months in India and all that had happened there. The time gave me a chance to process my experiences in the context of the world I found myself back in.

> “As I write, there’s the loud clatter, sound of power tools and shouting from workmen setting up scaffolding three doors up; and music from their all-weather outdoor stereo system. From time to time they sing along with it. I have the windows closed although it’s a lovely sunny spring morning. The house I currently live in is on a street of Victorian terraced housing and there are always several home improvement, roof replacement or maintenance projects underway. What price peace?
>
> It’s hardly just here either. This is the way the world is now. During the eight long months of lock down in Rishikesh last year, I was fairly hemmed in by construction noise on every side. When construction work was permitted to resume, they started with widening and resurfacing the road just outside my room and it went on from there. The first two weeks, however, everything shut down and the peace was startling. You could hear the wind and the bird song and just about nothing else. Down on the banks of the Ganges, the white water rafters had gone together with the adventure tourists, yoga schools and day trippers. I sat there one morning in the

sunshine, quite alone, and listened to the sounds of the river and the birds, the rushing of the waters and soaked in the sheer sublimeness of it. I guessed it wouldn't last long. This was how it had been from time immemorial, until the arrival of the twentieth century probably, when the tides of social, economic and technological change inexorably changed it forever. New hotels, guest houses and ashrams are under constant construction. When I checked up on the number of ashrams in Rishikesh alone recently, there were around a hundred of them.
The world we live in now is all consuming. When the key spiritual texts of India such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Agamas, the Puranas and the Bhagavad Gita were written, it was over a thousand or more years ago and the world was a very different place. Certainly there were the kinds of social distractions commonly identified and warned against when pursuing a spiritual pathway, but the learned sages can have had no idea of how much the world would change to how it is now. If it was considered difficult to commit to the spiritual pathway and disciplines required for that then, how very much harder now. In the third stage of the four stage life pathway set out for a Hindu person, the individual lets go of the world and their personal commitments and seeks the peace and seclusion of the forest and communion with nature, before finally renouncing the world completely, ahead of their death, where they might seek out a sacred pilgrimage location such as Varanasi. However is that possible now?"

In India it is still part of the traditional life that some people, usually older males, although occasionally younger and more rarely female, espouse the wandering monk state as sadhus, but in highly developed industrialised nations, including those often referred to as 'the west', unless you have managed to retire on a reasonable income and have access to private accommodation, it is almost impossible to seek this kind of seclusion. You cannot really wander the roads with no fixed abode in developed countries with laws against vagrancy and a predisposition to see non-conformist spiritually motivated people as mentally ill. Complicated and expensive visa arrangements are needed to live in other countries. The sheer size of humanity has increased exponentially, together with the vast urban developments they live in; industry and agriculture have expanded at the expense of the yearly dwindling forests and wild places. Beaches are developed for leisure and water sports and only the very wealthy can buy themselves something

that approaches genuine aloneness. With the massive growth of adventure travel, mountaineering, trekking and so on, it is harder to find oneself alone in the unspoilt wilderness. To enter an ashram or a retreat presumes you have the legal status to be in the country and the income to sustain you there. For sure there are people who find inventive ways to live in the gaps in between as it were, but these are generally the exception, not the rule.

The eight long months of lockdown in the Tapovan district of Rishikesh were in several ways like a kind of retreat for me, a time when, perforce, I engaged with the contents of my personal depths in the wake of having given up all that had constituted my life when I left the UK the previous November and embarked upon the final stage of this pilgrimage. But despite the location being an attractive hotel on the edge of Tapovan, with a nice garden and restaurant and friendly supportive staff running the place, if I thought I would be able to enjoy solitude and silence to advance my spiritual practice, I was sorely mistaken. Instead it proved an opportunity to practice strict Zen style detachment and engage with those aspects of my life conditioning that have ever made me noise averse. The best I could ever manage was accepting the noise, whilst also accepting that I will never be someone who ‘likes’ noise, particularly modern day noise consisting of large diesil engines, power tools and amplified sound.

The garden restaurant of the hotel beyond my balcony played 60s popular music throughout the day and evening, so I couldn’t escape the kinds of songs that I grew up with as a teenager, and I am not someone who nostalgically loves reminders of the music of their youth. I wanted peace and quiet, but that wasn’t to be, especially when the hotel management used the hiatus in hotel bookings consequent on the pandemic lockdown to renovate and upgrade many of the hotel rooms around me. In the end I was able to achieve a kind of vicarious truce which, whilst acknowledging the desirability of quiet, accepted that I shouldn’t be seeking literal peace in the ambient world, but within my own depths. Needing the world to be in a particular way in order for you to feel at peace only serves to bind you to conditions of the world. And, of course, the more money and power that you have in the world to buy or dictate the conditions you require, the less likely that you will ever learn the skills of detachment so fundamental for spiritual advancement.

> And so here I am again, this time in York UK, with the opportunity to re-engage with spiritual practices learned back in India. My guidance has ever been those lines from the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna exhorts Arjuna that to be a true yogi, one must be able to experience conditions of the world: pain, pleasure; success, failure; praise, blame, all with the same detached peace. I have most certainly improved over the years, but it is on-going practice and, still being human, there are certainly times when I do find it still a struggle. As the inward spiritual imperative is to seek out the mountain or forest retreat, solitude and silence (as Krishna himself says), to find myself back in noisy suburbia with its full impact of traffic, home renovations, outdoor music, barking dogs and so on can all feel to me rather like the medieval practice of wearing a hair shirt, so that the world is never too comfortable for the spiritual aspirant."

Dry Docks and Fallow Fields

I was to spend seven months back in the UK in all, which, from this perspective several years on seems excessive. It isn't my plan or purpose here to make this into a documentary of my life in general at this time, therefore the periods spent back in the UK will simply be treated as hiatuses in the overall trajectory of time that I have come to call 'the Pilgrimage cycles'. It seems, again from this perspective, that what is being required is a fallow period to allow lessons from the previous stage just finished to be adsorbed into the substrata of the psyche, and a preparation for the new cycle of growth to be made. That said, also from the perspective of another as I write, it can feel terrible too. It seems that the ending of the stage just over has to feel just like that, an ending, with firm lines – boundaries – drawn to separate them from the next stage currently unseen and unknowable. Since 'making plans' in the conventional sense of that, is, as described above here, generally not what is being required, then you can definitely feel like you've been somehow washed up and stranded onto some shore, or otherwise caught on a branch at the side of the spiritual life course river, where you will stay forever. And telling yourself these usual stories with attendant analogies about needing fallow periods, or times in the dry dock where you scrape barnacles from the hull and replace torn sails and outdated navigation systems can certainly wear thin.

But it was fairly clear that as soon as I'd returned, spending the first two weeks in voluntary quarantine (formal mandatory quarantine was to follow shortly), there would be pressure to resume being the person I had been up until the time I had left the UK in November 2019. There are several reasons for this, but given you are perforce required to live and interact with others, even as it was then in the still continuing pandemic conditions, the pressure to slip back into the old ways and lose those transcendent heights attained in the mountains little by little takes hold. Even as I write now it's taken me a long time to manage these times, which I think I do better than then, but still awkwardly. It's as though you've been given a small stipend from the Universe to cover the necessary demands of these periods back in the world; a little travel allowance as it were, but which never seems quite enough and is quickly used up.

Those you have known inevitably still relate to you in the way they always did for one thing. Brief contacts with you when you were still travelling really only served the important purpose of just checking you were still alive and (relatively) sane. And while they unquestionably love you and want the best for you, probably inevitably that means what is best for you in their terms. It is unlikely to mean that they would understand or condone your actually dying as a part of your ultimate calling, even if that is how you yourself have understood it. The aura and mystique of your journey and experiences on that journey has relatively little meaning or interest for them, understandably so. And given there are few enough words that could ever come close to relaying the sublimity of the experiences you've had, simply 'tearing up' or gazing misty eyed and inarticulate at them is unhelpful. They don't want a saint in their homes; or some version of the Prophet Jeremiah sitting grimly at the table, like death's head at a feast, making uncomfortable pronouncements about the vanity or transience of worldly life; or even the beauty of 'God' as you've experienced it. They want you to be witty and funny (or even bad tempered and irascible) as they remember you. Rather like an illness, you're given a brief period to suffer, but then convalescence is expected and a resumption of normal service. You hear their tales about their own lives and interests and what matters for them; and the cookies from the mundane world at large re-populate you with a determination to exploit whatever vulnerability your erstwhile conditionings have given you and once more try to shape your experience of life and what constitutes 'reality' as part of that. It is most certainly true, as I was quickly to learn, that probably the only way to maintain that transcendent detachment would have been never to return, but instead to have joined some monastery or ashram,

which is generally what is expected of the mature stages of the spiritual journey for those under the directive of a formal guide or guru. But I never even once felt called to do that, following the lonely path of Kaivalya as I always have. And monasteries and ashrams are really only worlds within worlds anyway, which you also have to adapt and conform to, largely losing that unique independent vision that the travails of the solitary journey gave to you.

Kathmandu

The journey from the UK to Nepal was predictably arduous, involving a convoluted series of connections determined by the Nepali government's restriction of commercial flights to just three airlines, three times a week, which meant I had to get a connection in Istanbul with Turkish Airlines, originating strangely in Copenhagen. The awkward journey, as ever stressful with demands for in date Covid tests at every stage of the way meant I had to get two expensive pcr tests to cover the entire 40 hour journey and be in date for three countries, each with different demands. The first leg to Copenhagen grounded me with a long overwait, so I needed to check into an airport hotel nearby. Tired and stressed and misunderstanding the pin error warnings on the Danish card reader at reception as I checked in, I managed to lock the pin on my debit card, which closed the use of the card on my current account until it could be unlocked back in the UK, an error that was to haunt me all the way around Nepal for the next five months. So far so good!

Arriving at length into Kathmandu, an immense crowd of disembarked passengers from the full flight assembled in front of the hangers designated to receive us all, and a small handful of officials sat at a couple of desks to laboriously record requisite arrival details, pencil on paper style. It looked like it was going to be interminable. But here I was to discover the truth of that inner guidance that had counselled me that doors would open for me when needed, as though by magic. It had been this way leaving the UK, when I had been able to secure a visa from the Nepal embassy very easily, then a flight, be it awkward, then to here. I was ushered towards the front of the queue as a 'senior' (sometimes it can be helpful, if unflattering for the vanity!) and then, shortly after, found myself called to a desk to give my details, passport stamped then waived onwards to the exit. I was one of the first passengers to get through, whereupon I found myself in the arrivals hall which by then was overwhelmed with luggage from the full planeload, with

baggage and boxes everywhere. It was impossible even to find space to walk through them all to check which might be yours, and my own a small hand baggage sized silver case could be readily hidden amongst the dozens of others. Then an idea suddenly struck me which was as though someone said “You should be able to find it by instinct”. So I closed my eyes, turned and walked a short way ahead of me, stopped, turned around, opened my eyes again and saw my case immediately in front of me. The gentle reassurance that doors would open and difficulties smoothed apparently was true! And so to the outside and my first sight of Kathmandu.

I had booked into one of the hotels recommended in the government guidance for quarantine, where it looked likely I would have to stay for ten whole days, itself a daunting prospect. Through the crowded outskirts of Kathmandu, the taxi eventually dropped me at reception and the hotel itself seemed attractive enough, set in its own grounds, given I had decided that being effectively under house arrest for this time called for being somewhere at least moderately modern and decent, with outdoor gardens to exercise in. It was good, finally, to be able to collapse in my room, into bed, and just recover. Here I was, finally, albeit in an odd interim decompression style chamber, before hitting the realities of Nepal and its capital, beckoning from the highway outside.

In the end I was there for five days instead of ten, itself a mercy given the few enough attractions of hotel pool, gardens and restaurant to pass the time. There is only so much pleasure to be had from eating in a restaurant and I have never been someone to enjoy lounging on loungers by hotel pools for more than a brief period, before boredom and a need to be active sets in. I had to arrange for another pcr test before I could be released however. And then I made my first foray outside and up the road, prosaically to an ATM where, heart in mouth, I needed to withdraw cash using my credit card for the first time, my only means of getting money since my debit card had been rendered functionally useless after Copenhagen.

I translocated to the other side of town, to a more historical and ethnically distinctive district closer to the famous Durbar Square: Chhatrapati, in the Thamel district, and a heritage style hotel called the Yeti, which, as I was to discover, was not unusual for this part of the world where yak and yeti themes abounded everywhere. In the back garden courtyard sat a large intimidating representation of what the sculptor thought a yeti looked

like (abominable snowman to the uninitiated, a reclusive being kindred to the American Big Foot, but native to the Himalayas), something hard not to see from one's bedroom windows at night. It transpired I was one of the few guests and the restaurant was still closed, with only breakfast provided, making sorties into the surrounding streets to eat a tiresome inevitability. The little wizened hotel receptionist and caretaker whose name I now forget was friendly and helpful, and took me on his scooter to a nearby eatery later that day, down a warren of back streets. It was rather a shock from the seclusion of the hotel, but a necessary first step out into the world that was Nepal, and Kathmandu, both vaguely similar to yet totally different from India for all that, and very much its own place.
But it did feel like I was finally on my way. Finding my way eventually into Durbar Square I was confronted with the reality of what happens when two catastrophes collide: the natural and the human. Evidence of the 2015 earthquake was everywhere around me with the famous historical buildings that Durbar Square is known for propped up by huge timber supports and in the process of reconstructive programmes suddenly halted by the pandemic which had, in its turn, shut down all construction work. I gazed around taking it all in, and the sheer astonishment on the faces of the local townsfolk everywhere at seeing me, the only foreigner. Possibly it was like seeing the first swallow of summer coming, as this was where literally thousands of tourists flocked to admire and photograph the different buildings and temples, paying a heavy fee for the entry permit. In all my stay of a few additional days in Kathmandu I only ever saw one other clearly foreign looking person.

Curious Kathmandu[24]

> "You certainly see interesting sights in Kathmandu; extraordinary even. Observing the dogs with their red tikka mark and garlanded with flowers was striking, but there were many other things that attracted my interest too, like a vendor of flutes, all tied together on top of a pole, like a tree.
>
> Then there were the goats tied up outside the temple to Kali (ominous sign this) and of course Kali herself, looking terrifying as she always does, with a knife in one hand and a severed human head in the other. This is an old residential district of

[24] See https://elizabethcurrie.info/2021/11/04/curious-kathmandu/

narrow streets cluttered with traffic, full of beautiful if dilapidated old buildings and confused tangles of electrical wiring everywhere overhead.

Juxtaposed with more conventional looking dress or jewellers shops and pharmacy stores are a wide array of stalls selling fruit, vegetables, flowers, sweets, shoes, meat, brass ornaments and vessels for ritual use, and even frightening masks for scaring evil spirits away. It can be challenging walking around here, navigating the throng of pedestrians, motorcyclists and vendors of every sort, trying not to get run over."

I had had an interesting and congenial neighbour on the flight from Istanbul to Kathmandu, a young Nepali man on his way home from the US to get married, and we had struck up an interesting conversation which helpfully passed the time. He had made several recommendations to me about his country, the main one being to head for the second largest city Pokhara, his home town, than stay in Kathmandu, and base myself in the Lakeside district there, one time focus of the bohemian artsy and tourism sector, by pretty Lake Phewa, and overseen by those glorious diadems of Himalayan snowcapped peaks, the Annapurna range. In all my many flights around the world over my life, he was one of the very few I have ever noted to abjure his flight video entertainment, but passed the time much as I did, staring out of the window, which we'd left open, at the midnight blue skies with their moon and stars, paling into orange dawn. Definitely someone after my own heart!

The other notable visit made was to Pashupatinath temple, the huge religious complex dedicated to the God Shiva as Lord of the Animals, the most ancient temple in Kathmandu and one of the holiest pilgrimage sites for Hindus, considered as the other half of Kedarnath temple, where I had my final puja and finished my India Pilgrimage in 2020. It seemed highly appropriate and auspicious to start this new Pilgrimage stage here, in Kathmandu, as it, too, had only recently opened up in the wake of the pandemic. There I headed and spent several happy hours wandering around the many shrines, pagodas and smaller temples and monuments strung out along the Bagmati river, itself with funereal and cremation ghats. The main temple sanctum remained off limits, but I found a little

shrine higher up into the complex of ancient buildings where I could make my prayers and offerings, and light a small lamp. It felt sufficient as a start to this period here.

The monsoon season was looming as June headed into July, and increasingly heavy rains started to threaten ease of travel, so it became important to move on from Kathmandu whilst I still could. So I made arrangements to move onto Pokhara as recommended by my flight companion and found what seemed a suitable guest house there in the Lakeside region, itself, also and strangely, called Greenhills. And here I was to stay for the next three months across one of the heaviest and most protracted monsoon seasons. The previous year in Rishikesh we had had a few rains from time to time, but nothing of the order of the summer in Nepal in 2021. Here it was too, that I started working on a new travel blog of my Pilgrimage journey and experiences, which eventually evolved into the In the Spirit website.

And Now, Nepal[25]

> "Day dawns to the sound of the continued heavy rain of the night and the cheerful croaking of a legion of frogs from the drenched rice paddies below. Clouds cling smokelike to the hillsides, enveloping the forest in their long undulating and misty caresses. The valley echoes to the raucous angry shouts of villagers engaged in the day long battle to evict marauding macaques from their fields of ripening maize. A neighbour's dog barks enthusiastically from the safe distance of a balcony, and the monkeys escape with armfuls of corn cobs. Morning advances and birds fly here and there, intent on their daily business, their calls filling the valley. I sit on my balcony and watch the scene evolve before me. Nepal. It's been two weeks now since I boarded the first flight from the UK that eventually, two full flights further on, brought me here. A long exhausting journey with awkward connections via Copenhagen and Istanbul. The new reality of long distance travel in the days of coronavirus and international lockdowns.
>
> It felt like a miracle to get here at all, given the complexities of visas, border closures, flight restrictions, quarantine requirements, and mandatory virus tests every stage of the way. That deeper instinct of wise counsel that has long guided

[25]See And Now, Nepal

me, also reassured that whenever needed, doors that seemed closed would always open for me. And they did, as if by magic. Thus did I arrive at last into my quarantine hotel on the edge of Kathmandu, a beautiful extensive, if now ageing establishment, set in lush tropical gardens and enter that always strange if essential period of ‘decompression’ as I call it, where the necessary habits and lifeways contingent upon one world reality are decommissioned and space made for others to emerge.

There I was able to rest and recover from the long journey and the seven strange long months spent in the UK following my return from India the previous November. I had finally concluded my year long pilgrimage with visits to three of the four spectacular high altitude Chota Char Dham pilgrimage sites of Gangotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath, and I knew then that the object of that period had been achieved and the journey (that stage of it) over and that, unexpectedly, I was being called to go back to the UK, something I had absolutely not expected. That, however, is a story of its own and not one I will recount here, excepting to say that it counted as a kind of dimension of its own, both different from yet part of that overall journey I had been intent upon and, once over, it was clear that the way forward lay back in the Indian subcontinent, this time Nepal.”

Greenhills, Pokhara

I took a car from the Yeti hotel in Kathmandu to go to Pokhara, the first of the season’s heavy rains having fallen the previous day, making driving conditions difficult, and it was still raining hard on the long journey, so the first sight of the countryside and mountains surrounding the Kathmandu valley was shrouded darkly in mist, grey and uninviting. But the general order, cleanliness and attractiveness of the towns and villages we passed through immediately offered a contrast with northern India that I had been used to, with many of the residential buildings well designed and built, unlike much of the breeze block and ad hoc building that many Indian suburban districts can be known for.

Greenhill itself was to remain off limits for another week however, given an error with the booking. The Greenhills guest house itself was owned by a lovely Nepali family as part of

their extensive small holding of terraced fields, and run by their son Ishwor, with whom I was to develop a very engaging friendship across my stay there. Ishwor had mistakenly double booked – itself proving fortuitous given the room as I later found out would in fact have not been ideal. He fixed a temporary arrangement with his friends who ran a yoga operation higher up the hill road, although currently still closed, which offered stunning views over Phewa Lake and the surrounding mountains. And here little by little I had time to acclimatise to the new Pilgrimage period, out of Kathmandu and to the open space ahead.

Green hills and wet fields[26]

> “The hillsides echo now to shouts from men ploughing the rice paddies, navigating the teams of oxen along the narrow field lines flooding with water. Women crouch plucking the young rice plants from the nursery plots ready for replanting in the fields. It is pouring with rain, and everything is soaked. The monsoon season marks one point in the annual agricultural rotation, when the maize is harvested and the fields transformed into paddies. This is a real marriage of Eastern and West hemispheres, as rice is a domesticate of Asia and maize of Mexico. Having spent much of my life living and working in South America, it seems odd for me to see them juxtaposed in this way, sometimes seeming like one culture, then another. Shouting seems part of the daily order of things here. With the ripening of the maize come the marauding macaques from the forests to steal armfuls of corn cobs and so you hear the angry shouts of the village folk driving them off. Or else small wily mongooses sneak up under the cover, of the tall vegetation, intent upon the villagers’ chickens. Now the ox team drivers shout at the oxen as they drudge ankle deep in the mire, up and down the field lines as they have for hundreds of years now.
>
> I arrived into Lakeside Pokhara from Kathmandu two weeks ago, but already it feels like an aeon has passed. Hard even to recall clearly the city and my time there, let alone the long and arduous journey that brought me to Nepal, now more than three weeks ago. As for the UK, the several months spent there across winter into

[26] See Green hills and wet fields

midsummer have acquired a dreamlike quality, unreal in a trajectory that now feels like it has led uninterrupted from my year in India, to here.

I had arrived into Kathmandu approximately the same time as the monsoon and the weather was already becoming hotter and more humid, but then still with plenty of sunshine. During the five days of quarantine, I was able to swim and sunbathe by the hotel pool, not something I normally do but, unable to go out, there wasn't a lot else to do anyway. Then, released unexpectedly early into freedom, a few more days followed when I was able to visit some of the ancient sights that Kathmandu is famous for: the Shree Pathupatinath temple and Durbar Square. It still seemed unreal to be there then, particularly as I was one of the very few tourists to have made it into Nepal, just then emerging from a lockdown that had closed the country's borders. To now, when it seems like I have never really left this part of the world at all.

The monsoon has been very severe these last two weeks with deluges lasting all night, or all day and immense electric storms. Last year sitting out the lockdown in Uttarakhand India it was very much milder, the occasional downpour, the occasional storm, certainly higher tropical levels of humidity, but in time it passed, returning to the intense dry heat India is known for. Uttarakhand is just west of here over the border and on the same latitude as Nepal, and it was of course from there that I made my three sublime visits into the high Himalayas to the Chota Char Dham pilgrimage sites which marked the end of the my long sojourn in India and touched my heart in a way that guaranteed I would someday soon return."

My principal memory of my three month stay at Greenhills was defined by the monsoon, and being grounded with other guests there who largely all conformed to the international backpacker or hippie set, several of whom had been marooned in Nepal from the lockdown period of the previous year and were still waiting out their time there. There was a young Chinese man with dense long black dishevelled hair who, from a distance, I had formed the view was a woman, then a young Australian man, and these two occupied rooms on the upper floor where they mostly kept themselves to themselves and played their guitars. Below this I had inherited a large attractive room, ex of an American spiritual

seeker, on one corner of the building with a private balcony overlooking the surrounding forested hills with their swathes of cloud and Phewa lake in the distance. Further along, there was a young American woman with a Russian boyfriend who smoked strong cigarettes almost perpetually, and she had a hapless scruffy dog she had acquired on her travels and was attempting to get the documentation organised to freight back with her to the US. Finally, at the other end of the common balcony, was a group of Brazilian Shiva yogis, who had, like me, just recently arrived in Nepal and had headed to Pokhara, winding up at Greenhills too. They had brought with them a truly impressive collection of musical instruments which included a yukele, bongo drums, a hang drum and a didgeridoo, all of which I was to have to listen to as part of the sonic backdrop to the place. Spare rooms were taken up by other travellers from time to time, all conforming to the International backpacker set, all of whom always smoked cigarettes as though of a norm, giving credence to the health statistics of the rise in smoking amongst young people globally. This is one thing I have often noted, that whatever the country legislation controlling smoking in public places, such as in restaurants, it is completely absent whenever you travel, with people routinely lighting up wherever they are, eating venues included, and never ever asking if it is ok to do so.

The yogis had originally had rooms on the ground floor, but the couple had just moved up to take over the room I had been allocated earlier, and they and their friend, erstwhile himself of Rishikesh and who had known my good Brazilian yoga teacher friend from earlier times, used the end of the balcony there as their permanent hang out, where they talked, smoked hashish and played music on the different instruments, or a player; and occasionally erupted with loud exhortations “*Om* namah shivaya”. Guilas, the principal yogi, practised a distinct form of yoga – yoga nidra - built around lucid dreaming and had an online following, from what I understood, periodically counselling acolytes back in Brazil from this large distance. I couldn’t work out exactly why they had felt moved to come here to Nepal, given it being the monsoon season, they spent the entire time holed up at the guest house, excepting for brief sorties, pretty much in the way I was. There were intentions to travel further, but I was never to learn if these happened or not, and from what I ever understood later from Ishwor, they separated eventually after falling out and returned to Brazil.

Guilas, then in his early thirties, wore his long hair in matted dreadlock shiva yogi style and had a lean and well-muscled physique – consequent on his hatha yoga practice. His English was excellent and we would occasionally talk and discuss views and ideas, but it was clear from the outset that he rated his overall sense of himself and his spiritual development very highly, making it clear that, as a mere ‘older person’ I was likely still far less spiritually evolved, knowledgeable or experienced in life than he already was, a form of egoic self-belief itself betraying his real underlying spiritual immaturity. He was surprised to find out later that although I was actually rather a late arrival to the world of Indian theology, being well grounded in South American Indigenous and shamanistic cosmologies, I still knew the medieval Shiva Tantras, unfamiliar to him, and showed him my digital copies of key works. Their friend was rather more laid back and congenial and seemed to take rather a shine to me. He liked to attach himself to different people and hang out talking with them, as I understood he had with the American man who had formerly had the room I now had.

I have ever been someone who has courted my own space, peace and privacy, so it was hard for me to deal with these shared living arrangements, surrounded by folk who constantly smoked and hung out playing loud music. But I determined to see it as an opportunity to be more relaxed and tolerant, itself never easy for me. Occasionally the yogis invited me to share pizza with them and certainly there were times when we seemed to get along better. But for me the rub was ever there, especially given my end room would be the last resting place for their hashish smoke which the prevailing wind always blew there.

The other itinerant guests came with their own challenges. Ishwor, seeing my sensitivities, did his best to shield me and more than once intervened to try and minimise their impact, so I was grateful to him for this. He would take me on the back of his motorbike down into Pokhara occasionally where we’d hang out talking at a local café. He himself was a Shiva devotee but in much more of a traditional way, and he would on occasion do pilgrimages himself, hiking to the distant Shiva statue, just visible upon the summit of a hill on the far side of the lake. His long term goal was to build a yoga centre at the house and he was a pretty clued up young guy with mature views, and himself had a general dislike of the international hippie scene with its drugs and general casualness, particularly in those still

covid days when few cared to respect the guiding protocols governing keeping distance and wearing face masks.

To Be a Pilgrim[27]

> “It’s pouring with rain again, harder than ever. After the brief respite of a day, one sunset and a few stars we’re back to full on monsoon. It’s hard to imagine where all this water comes from. Fortunately most of the families here about have harvested their maize, ploughed and flooded the paddies (easy in this weather) and planted the rice, so most of the work for this stage of the agricultural year is over.
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> The didgeridoo drones on from somewhere below. The American girl’s Indian boyfriend has made a surprise reappearance after yesterday’s argument, so there are some hopes the pair might at last decamp to the forest retreat up the road, whence they were originally headed. His sudden appearance the day before on the balcony right next to my room, playing Bollywood music loudly on his mobile phone and smoking didn’t exactly endear me to him from the outset. His temporarily abandoned lady has the tiresome habit of opening and closing the door of their room on and off throughout the night, with a loud snap from the bolt in the lock right next to where my head is. Impossible not to hear it.
>
> The German lad from downstairs yesterday moved into the room recently vacated by the previous American girl with her two dogs and Russian boyfriend just over a week ago. His room mate mercifully seems to have moved on, taking little Woodie, the cutsie yapping puppy with him. Little Woodie used to be my early morning call until a few days ago; now it’s the new American girl. Latest arrival German lad talks to himself all the time and smokes practically non stop. I’ve got used to the three Brazilian yogis at the end of the balcony who seem nice and friendly enough, and they only smoke dope. Their regular invocations to Shiva, singing of mantras and live jam sessions with ukulele, a variety of drums and (aforementioned) didgeridoo have somehow managed to bypass my surveillance systems ever intent upon neighbourhood watch. I’ve enjoyed long talks about Yoga and esoteric tantra

[27] See: To Be a Pilgrim

religion with them, and we've exchanged admiring comments of each others' tattoos.

This is the real life of a pilgrim, in part anyway, where the work to be done on the deeper self is ongoing. You never ever have to look for it, it is always where you are. Fundamentally it's about confronting your deeper social programming and cultural conditionings, those characteristics deemed good and bad that make you into the person you (and others) experience yourself as being. This self is, however, a social construct and generally known as one's 'ego'. The goal of all Yogic systems, Zen methodology and Buddhism in general is to recognise that this egoic construct is just that. It isn't real, however real you feel it is and however much you allow it to define you. Not a thing can be allowed to remain that pulls you back into the world and into earlier versions of yourself. The pathway is slow and painful to negotiate and I've been following it for years now. However, my perennial, indeed lifelong dislike of intrusive neighbour noise finally got the better of me and I did sally forth at one thirty last night to give the German lad a piece of my mind, as his muttering had evolved into periodic loud exclamations. He seems to have this private interactive thing going with his mobile phone. He was sat in the dark on the piece of balcony in front of his room (a mere five paces from mine) engulfed in a haze of acrid cigarette smoke. He seemed chastened and apologised, but we'll see if that endures or whether nightly confrontations are now going to be of the order. The search for that elusive perfection continues."

As the pressure of communal living tightened the screw on my nerves and coping strategies, I decided it would be a good idea to take a break somewhere sufficiently far away and rediscover my sense of self in peace and privacy. Up on the ridge above Pokhara lay another small town called Sarangkot, from where you could, during clearer weather, see the Annapurna range with its snow-capped peaks. Early in my stay I had seen the curious vivid jagged white double spur of what was Machapuchari – Fishtail mountain – jutting up into the sky on one of the last clear days. So I took my leave of my yogi and traveller neighbours and translocated to a small hotel in the little community, barely more developed than the village it had once been before the demands of tourism and trekking had taken it over. It was to be a short lived break however, as there really wasn't a whole lot to do there either, and brief walks around the environs hoping for better

glimpses of Annapurna, or sitting in the restaurant when not in my room quickly palled. Clouds still hid the mountains from view, and the rains continued barely uninterrupted. In brief drier episodes I walked up to the top of the ridge past a large new redbrick temple still in the process of construction, and up and down along the highway enjoying the expansive views over Phewa lake, now even more distant than before. After three days, Ishwor happily agreed to my returning so back I went, to resume life pretty much as it had ever been there.

The Lotus Eaters[28]

> “It’s now three days since I returned from Sarankgot and life has predictably settled back down into much the same rhythm it had before I left. But I’m hopeful I can manage the challenges of commune living with a little more grace and detachment. The folk here, at least up here on the floor where I stay, were gratifyingly happy to see me come back. As I write out on my balcony, the valley falls away to Phewa Lake and the distant heights beyond with Shiva sitting in quiet contemplation. It’s a farming community with a little tourist development at the guest house level, but there’s no question that it’s still largely life on the land here. The rice, planted into the monsoon wet paddies a few weeks ago has grown a lot since then, casting its vivid emerald greenness everywhere.
>
> Here the household has settled back down to the seven long term guests that form the core of the guest house, plus the family and the occasional more itinerant traveller staying a night or two. There are few of these given travel here is still very restricted. We’re an eclectic bunch certainly, but I’m not sure if you could describe us as being lotus eaters or simply new age travellers. On the top floor live the young Australian guy, here since last year and a young Chinese man, also a long term resident, who sings at the top of his voice from time to time. He wears his long hair loose and wild, and before I moved to live here, seeing him from a distance on his balcony, I formed the view that he was a woman of indeterminate ethnicity. How wrong first impressions can be. Both play guitars.

[28] See: The Lotus Eaters

On this floor there's me as the resident Brit, who loosely passes as a 'spiritual seeker', Saiva[i] and writer. I play no musical instruments however, nor do I sing (a mercy to all). Then there's the German lad and two of the three Brazilian Saiva yogis, the third living on the ground floor, but spending much of his time up here. Their musical repertoire has already been described. The family running the establishment varies in size depending upon who of them is visiting. Their son is responsible for running the business which he does with admirable skill, as well as being a promising cook of international cuisine and a motorcyclist who'll happily take you for a white knuckle ride down into the town and all around the mountain roads. They are friendly and helpful and will always do their best to make your stay comfortable and enjoyable.

But for the most part they tend their organic small holding of cultivation terraces and the ongoing demands of the agricultural year: the ploughing, sowing, harvesting, tending the family's buffalo and chickens. For breakfast every morning there's always a free range newly laid egg.

Below as I write some establishment from down in the valley is playing "The Shape of You" (aka I'm in love with your body) loudly. It clashes strangely with the otherwise normative rural life and country noises, mixing improbably with myriad bird calls, bellowing of buffalos and bleating of goats, dogs barking, children playing and always the ubiquitous cockerels crowing loudly and incessantly throughout the day, never just dawn. The weather is certainly improving now, with more sunshine and open skies and much less rain. We haven't had a storm for well over a week now. In the way of life, with the opening skies of course I know that those oh so elusive mountains behind the ridge, mostly hidden from view during my brief stay up in Sarankgot, will likely be fully visible once more. Well, so it seems my brief trip there was by way of a preview and their full glory awaits me sometime in the future."

July eventually passed. Come August, cabin fever and social claustrophobia gradually resumed its hold, together with the rather inevitable frustration of still being grounded in Greenhills (Pokhara) with not a lot to do, and the weeks stretching into months lying ahead. Occasional visits down into Lakeside with Ishwor, or sometimes on my own, were not enough to allay the creeping boredom. I needed to have some sort of onward plan, so I

opened negotiations with Rahul, in country friend of my flight companion to Kathmandu, who kindly served as informal guide and advisor. He suggested a trip up to the renowned pretty traditional village of Ghandruk, with onward connections to Tadapani, where his family lived. I could stay at his family's guest house in Tadapani as long as I liked and he offered me a very generous full board and lodging deal there. The jeep duly collected me and off we set off early in August, passing through the outskirts of Pokhara to collect some other passengers, family members of Rahul and friends, who wanted to avail themselves of the chance of a free return journey to Ghandruk.

The Road to Annapurna[29]

"We left early on a Wednesday morning nearly three weeks ago now. We had to make it up to Ghandruk from Pokhara with enough time to trek onwards up to Tadapani before evening or bad weather set in. The land rover finally left the city after collecting several additional passengers, all family members or relatives it seemed, their children and baggage, stuffed into the available space and spilling out everywhere. They all talked fast and non stop the entire journey in that strange, strident rather guttural tone the local women here have. As a lover of silence including during journeying, It felt wearing after awhile. I had expected to have the vehicle to myself, excepting for the older lady, wife of the guest house owner, up at our destination.

The road was easy enough out of Pokhara for the first hour, through the mountains climbing gradually, with immense views of forested hills and deep valleys with rivers and waterfalls opening out on every side. It was good to get out of Lakeside after spending a whole month there; since arriving from Kathmandu at the end of June in fact. We were lucky with the weather, which was clear with occasional sunshine. My drive from Kathmandu had been through the torrential rain that has marked the progression of the monsoon season ever since, even to today. This mattered, because from Ghandruk I was changing to horseback and didn't really relish the idea of three hours of solid drenching.

[29] See: The Road to Annapurna

After the first hour, the land rover turned off the main highway and we were on the road to Ghandruk. I use the term ‘road’ loosely here as the severity of the monsoon had left it deeply rutted, eroded by rivers and blocked by landslides. I’ve seen all sorts of roads in my time, but this has earned the dubious privilege of being the worst ever. The remaining travellers decamped at the spot on the edge of the village where we were met by the guide with pack horse and a porter who lugged all the baggage in a large basket strapped to his head. The lady of the household accompanied us, having spent a few days with relatives down in the city.

The path up to Tadapani was steep and stony, and in many places made almost impassable through landslides and erosion. But the people of these parts are well used to these conditions and walking everywhere with heavy baggage. Although the pack mules and horses carry a certain amount of foodstuffs and heavy goods, I was told that all the heaviest and most awkward equipment like refrigerators and washing machines were all portered up in the same manner as my baggage, slung on the back with a strap around the head. It seemed unimaginable.

Riding in this manner (I am not one of life’s trekkers) I was at leisure to see the expansive mountain vistas, although much of the time we were also trekking through dense Himalayan high mountain forest – ancient woodlands, some of them over a thousand years old. A brief stop for tea at an unlikely small tea shop that emerged through the mists, and then on again. It must be remembered that these are the well trodden trekking routes that normally see hundreds of visitors every year. The monsoon season and the pandemic have joined forces to close the adventure travel business completely, at least for the time being. I was the only foreign visitor in Tadapani for months apparently.

Arriving some three hours after leaving the jeep at Ghandruk, the reality of the situation became apparent. Tadapani is not in fact a settlement, merely a collection of small guest houses entirely serving the needs of trekkers, so the standard is fairly basic at best. Rains had taken out the hydroelectric plant serving the settlement, so there had been no power for nearly a month, with one line only, borrowed from a neighbour, to charge mobile phones, which everyone living there used. The hotel itself was rustic and ‘quaint’, reminding me of what some medieval hostelry from the

days of Chaucer might have been like; that or some establishment from the wild west. The rooms were monk cell simple; the toilets and showers communal and outside. I can cope with exterior shower facilities, but always need a loo in my room, so this was a blow given I had double checked and been reassured that there were toilets right next to where my room would be. I hadn't, however, understood that this meant literally outside, meaning nightly excursions into the cold and wet.

The clouds had descended by then and the famed vistas of Annapurna and Machapuchare, now grandstand view close, were hidden behind them, as indeed they had been pretty much since I have been here. No matter, I reminded myself, I was here for different reasons, trekking and sight seeing not amongst them. I had spent nearly a whole month staring at the cloudy forested hillsides of Lakeside, and then again up at Sarankgot, whence I had gone once in desperation, for just a brief glimpse, which brief it most certainly had been, teased by a single fleeting vision of the immense snowy heights of the Annapurna range the first afternoon there, before cloud had once again engulfed them.

Why so important? Of course they are majestic and beautiful and infinitely worth seeing just for that. But, more importantly, the mountains were for me symbolic of my deeper purpose, hence being teased by fleeting visions of them was itself highly symbolic of that. People come to this region specifically to see the mountains and generally also to climb them, so coming in the monsoon season would always be pointless. Not only is it rare to catch a glimpse of these elusive giants with the heavy cloud cover, it would be almost impossible to try and climb them. In Zen philosophy, it goes something like this: Before Zen, a mountain is just a mountain. During Zen, a mountain is the sublime truth and spiritual heights of the seeker. After Zen, a mountain is just a mountain. I was still pretty much on that upward ascent to the goal of Realisation, if by then certainly far advanced. I had already been to the mountains nearly a year earlier during my visits to the three Chota Char Dham pilgrimage sites of Gangotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath, in that narrow window of opportunity between the opening up from the lockdown in India and the closing up with the arrival of the winter snows. That mountain range is simply a part of the high Himalayas that stretch from Pakistan through to the mountain Kingdom of Bhutan and beyond, high up to the Tibetan Plateau. Uttarakhand is on the same

approximate latitude as its geographical neighbour Nepal, so the range that includes Annapurna is not so far from them. Then I had consummated my year long Indian pilgrimage by visiting these three sublime and sacred sites and had experienced an indescribable vision of Highest Reality as manifest there (in Yogic terms if loosely, Prakriti).[ii] Then I had had to return to the UK for six months, so coming back to Nepal and its mountains has always symbolised for me a return to that sacred journey and a re-engagement with and deepening of the visionary truths I had had earlier.

More prosaically, I had time to consider all this from the balcony of the guest house in Tadapani, scrutinising the clouds for the smallest signs of a mountain beyond and the rain sweeping across the landscape. Below me in the hostel precincts clucked chickens and a curious trio of two large male and one female turkeys. At first it was entertaining to observe the antics of the two turkey cocks as they strutted and occasionally fought one another in a semi permanent Mexican standoff (made all the more relevant as they are fowls which were originally domesticated there). The hen would sometimes try to intervene by offering herself in a prone mating position, but this merely exacerbated the competition and aggravation, one male balancing precariously on her back whilst fighting off the contender. In time, their constant strident and querulous bickering became merely an irritant.

Nights were predictably marked by cold visits to the outdoor loo and bedding that had that distinctive musty smell that comes from lack of use and damp storage. The first morning, after warming porridge and tea, I stirred myself to go out and explore one of the trekking routes that went up behind the guest house and into the forest – a real Tolkien style Fangorn forest it was too with ancient beautiful trees festooned with ferns, mosses and lichens, practically a forest in their own right. The mountains were visible occasionally through the trees, adorned with their own forests and waterfalls everywhere, but the magnificent giants were still guarding their secrets. I had been warned about the danger of leeches, as this neck of the woods (literally) is really bad at this wet time of year and having had one unpleasant experience with a leech back in Lakeside, I didn’t want to repeat it.

In this way three days passed uneventfully enough, and, when able to get myself out of bed at dawn, I was rewarded with a partial vista of my snow-capped neighbours on one occasion at least. Even without them, the views are awesome and the sheer scale of these mountains reaching far up into the sky, hard to imagine. My planned stay of a week or longer diminished with the passing of time, the miserable broken nights visiting the outdoor loo, and the challenge of little to do but contemplate the clouds and the rain and cheer myself up with regular cups of tea, or petting the family cat. The food, I should point out, was at least plentiful, wholesome and tasty and the family running the place unfailingly kind and obliging.

I arranged for the horse to come and get me on day four and take me back to Ghandruk, where an arrangement with an hotel run by another member of the family had helpfully been made. And so I bade my farewell to this strange upland forested world and made the reverse trek downhill – much more challenging than coming up, as some parts of the path involved nearly vertical leaps downhill. Here my riding skills proved not only welcome but essential, and undoubtedly prevented me from being flung off the horse on several occasions. The day itself was beautiful however, clear, sunny and hot. And so to Ghandruk village and the next part of the tale."

Monsoons, meat and mountains[30]

"The journey from Tadapani down to Ghandruk took around half the time as it had going up, unsurprising given the precarious speed of the steep descent. Ghandruk itself is around 500 metres lower in altitude than Tadapani and, until the arrival of the adventure trekking business, was merely a small Nepalese village of pretty, traditional style houses constructed of stone, timber and slate.

The access ways were all paved with stone slabs which circled the contour of the land, as well as uphill and down, interlinking the community in an extended network of small roads which often morphed into steep flights of steps. You could walk them or navigate them with horses or mules, but nothing else. Everywhere people lived pretty much as they ever had, tending their small holdings of rice, maize or millet,

[30] See: Monsoons, meat and mountains

washing by hand at the open air water troughs, the daily chores life at the most basic level of technology. It is quite understandable that many people have embraced the trekking business here as an opportunity to earn a little money, improve their standards of living and make life a little more comfortable.

Adventure tourism had made its usual mark in the form of a spreading rash of small modern hotels and guest houses, the majority of which were now closed thanks to the impact of the pandemic. Indeed, I was lucky to be here at all, as only recently the community administration had closed the district to outsiders through concerns about the rising numbers of coronavirus cases, deferring my planned trip to Tadapani by two weeks. As it was, relatively few guest houses were receiving visitors, and I had been lucky to be accepted by the owners of one, relatives of the same family running the hostel further uphill, two congenial and attentive sisters. A modern, unremarkable building, its claim to fame was having one of the best panoramic views of the Annapurna Range (when visible), from their terrace rooftop. Thus it was that I repaired for just over a week.

Having an indoor bathroom was a definite advantage; no more nightly excursions out into the cold. After the bright hot sunny descent, the weather closed in again and the rains continued more or less unabated. Occasional breaks afforded glimpses of the usual expansive mountain scenery with forests and waterfalls, but the elusive giants yet remained elusive. The monsoon this year has been unrelenting in its intensity and severity, and the occasional day or two’s respite has been rapidly followed by more torrential infrastructure wrecking downpours. Thus it was that a delayed consignment of yak meat arrived early one morning, coinciding with the closure of the road out to Pokhara (whence it had been destined) by a landslide, and a lengthy power outage that had shut down the fridge freezer. Fortunately there are still remembered traditional means of preserving meat.

The first I knew about it was when I went down into the communal dining room to see several ladies sitting around on the floor processing the meat for drying. It looked like the immediate aftermath of a massacre. Strings of the meat were hung on poles around a huge rusty old stove and the floor was splattered with bits of bone, meat, blood and the entire place smelt heavily of it, like a butcher’s shop. If

ever you wanted a fast track to being a vegetarian, then this would've been it. However, I decided to tough it out (in the way I used to with traditional country living in the Andes) as I think it's too easy to become effete and overly squeamish in our developed Western cultures. This is real life for the people living here, so although the smell was enough to make you gag, I determined to stick it out and eventually shared a lunch of yak stew with everyone. It tasted much like beef and if I hadn't have known better, I would have thought it was.

The following day I was taken to spend lunchtime and most of the afternoon at a very old fashioned traditional house further down the village, constructed with timber, brick and slate, and with a beaten earth floor. It was reminiscent in many ways of my erstwhile experiences living with Indigenous people in the Ecuadorian Andes. The house was full of several senior ladies, all sitting around on the floor exchanging stories and gossip and going into gales of raucous laughter periodically, as well as smoking cigarettes (Nepali women do seem to smoke a lot surprisingly). One elderly lady with a voice that sounded like it came from the depths of a gravel pit, was casually lighting her cigarettes with a large flaming brand straight from the open hearth, alongside which two small kittens were curled up sleeping. Diverse other cats meowed around, angling for scraps. The ladies seemed very happy to have me there and share the yak bone broth and other traditional foods with them, despite my being unable to join in their conversations. There's the always uncomfortable experience of sitting mutely and smiling vacantly whilst incomprehensible jokes are exchanged, evidently about you as everyone is looking at you as they all laugh. I was given some locally brewed liquor distilled from millet grain that looked like water, but most certainly wasn't. An old gent who might have been someone's husband was sleeping off the effects of drinking too much of it the previous night (so I was told) in a bed in the corner of the room."

The week in Ghandruk passed uneventfully enough, with daily walks around the village along the intricate network of stone paved walk ways, weather permitting. Occasionally I had longer talks with one or other of the sisters who ran the hotel, relatives of Rahul who seemed to have a very large extended family. I learned of an American man who lived there who had managed to get himself a residency visa by marrying an older lady of the community (presumably for a certain fee), but it had solved his long term living

arrangements, for the time being at least. Having battled with visa requirements across my life, mostly in Ecuador where I had worked over many years, I joked that perhaps I should do the same, but that I would want to marry a young guy, not an old one. I thought nothing more of it until the following day when Tara, the older sister, approached me with an odd intense look and said that if I was serious about it, there really wouldn't be any trouble whatever in fixing me up with a young man from the community to marry. I was startled. I was familiar enough with traditional marriage arrangements in the rural parts of Ecuador, a country I had worked in over many years of carrying out archaeological projects, where foreign researchers from universities overseas, generally the US but also Europe and almost always male, could unwittingly get drawn into local family dynamics which could result in their marrying a daughter. So commonplace was this that an American archaeologist I knew stopped bringing her teenage son with her over several years (but brought her daughter) to avoid the almost inevitable risk of his becoming the victim of a 'honey trap' in this way. It was seen as a perfectly legitimate redistribution of wealth opportunity, where someone from a rich country would then be accessible as a resource for all the other family members. I knew of one American man at least whom this had happened to; also a British man. In this case I would get the visa, and the family would then have legitimate access to my perceived assets: money, and work or study opportunities in the UK. The fact that I had the smallest of incomes barely enough to sustain me and nothing more, as I had given everything away at the start of my Pilgrimage, wouldn't have been well understood. But clearly there was no question on my part of getting drawn into such an arrangement for any reason whatever. Even in earlier days, marriage for any other reason than love would have been dishonest, and anyway, I had now 'renounced' life in the world and all that went with that. So I assured them that I was, in fact, already married to Lord Shiva, as the conspicuous wedding henna style tattoo on my left hand and forearm demonstrated, and the golden wedding ring I always wore. But it still felt uncomfortably like I had narrowly avoided a trap myself. And possibly, too, there was some young man in the wider community who had himself narrowly escaped being obligated to get married to some foreign woman more than twice his age.

Monsoon, meat and mountains continued:

> "So the days passed pretty much as usual, starting early in the morning breakfasting up on the roof terrace, scrutinising the expansive view for any sign of

Annapurna or Machapuchare. It is extraordinary how these mountains, as immense as they are, can so easily shroud themselves in a way that you would never know they were there at all. At times, sometimes early in the morning or late in the afternoon, there would be a small shift in the cloud cover and you would get a brief glimpse and have to rest content with that. So, as luck or destiny would have it, the first morning that dawned brilliantly clear with the entire Annapurna range sparkling white in the sunlight, a sight I had been waiting for for weeks, had to coincide with an unexpected group of other in-country travellers passing through, occupying my grandstand view and completely hijacking the occasion. I couldn't bring myself to stay and have to engage in the usual platitudes of which country I was from and when did I arrive in Nepal, so I went and had a long cold shower instead, which perversely felt like the only way to express the depths of my feelings. It felt like the Universe was trolling me.

Never mind, a couple of mornings later, I was finally able to enjoy the view again, this time by myself, as well as occasional sightings towards evening. And that I'll have to be content with, for the time being at least, until the next trip takes me back into the mountains, which I am planning next month to the remote province Mustang, high up by the Tibetan plateau, and to the ancient high altitude temple Muktinath with its view of Mount Kailash.

I arrived back into Lakeside after an absence of just two weeks, although inevitably it felt longer. The rice had grown impressively in my absence and now stood tall lush and dense, the entire view of the valley down to the lake one intense expansive emerald green. Pond herons that had waded through the paddies searching for prey were now barely visible in this jungle. And the rains continue unabated …"

My protracted stay at Greenhills Lakeside was finally approaching its end however, having just about exhausted all possibilities for personal growth there. Walks were few given the weather and otherwise limited in extent because of the difficulty of the terrain, whilst visits down into the town were largely contingent upon the good offices of Ishwor. It felt as though I was treading water, ironically symbolic in those weeks of continuing heavy rains and the surrounding drenched rice paddies. Things eventually came to a head when, after

weeks of repressing my annoyance at the daily invasion of hashish smoke into my room, one morning the yogis at the end of the communal balcony lit up their pipes as usual, the customary start to their day, and instantaneously the prevailing wind took it straight into my sleeping quarters. I made my feelings known in no uncertain terms and our erstwhile easy relationship cooled by several degrees. Guilas looked stony faced and his friend Emiliano explained that in Brazil they had grown up with an acceptance of smoking as the social norm. I was apparently unusual, as well as odd with my overt dislike of smoking dope in particular, and having to be a passive smoker of theirs. But it was the decisive signal I had needed to firm up my onward plans.

Infinity Dining[31]

> “The monsoon has been unrelenting this year, pretty much since I arrived in Nepal, certainly in Lakeside Pokhara. Happily, however, there have been occasional respites and it’s important to be ready to take full advantage of these as you never know when there might be another. The skies clear and the sun shines and hopes rise that the monsoon might be nearing its end – until the next storm. Sometimes the rains are intermittent and during the night, with the days brighter and sunnier, but there are frequently episodes of non stop downpours extending from one day into the next, as now.
>
> I had been planning a visit to the great Shiva statue on the hill overlooking Lakeside since I first saw it, and wrote the earlier post ‘Shiva’s Land’. So, a recent lifting in the weather coinciding with my actually being here to enjoy it, I took up the offer of a visit there with my young friend and host at Greenhills, Ishwor. Ishwor has a motorbike and sometimes takes me down into Lakeside for shopping and coffee. It’s a great experience, zooming along on the open road with the wind in your face. I have always loved speed and used to drive fast when I owned a car.
>
> This drive was to be rather longer and more challenging than the weekly visit into Lakeside, given Shiva is located high on a hilltop the other side of Phewa Lake and given, too, that the road leading up to it is pretty much as bad as the road to Ghandruk, thanks to the impact of the heavy rains. This became particularly

[31] See Infinity Dining

apparent when we stalled in one deep muddy hole and the foot I put out to balance myself sunk into mire up to my ankles, taking my shoe off with it. But aside from this and given the potential for more serious mishaps, we made it up in good time and safely.

The statue sits atop a large modern temple and the whole edifice is still under construction, although now nearing completion. Saturday crowds of day trippers were swarming everywhere and the general air of a construction site, complete with noise and widely strewn debris and litter undoubtedly detracted from the otherwise stately, serene air of the statue itself. I am not an enthusiast of modern Hindu depictions of divinities, although I understand that many folk do want an externalised image that conforms to their idea of a particular divine personage. However, this Shiva managed to combine an air of majestic, transcendent omnipotence with a more earthly male vigour and power. As Supreme Being, this may be an acceptable way to convey the formless All Powerful in a manner we lesser humans can relate to.

We wandered around taking photos of the statue and surrounding scenery, the views from this vantage point as ever expansive and inspirational, given the relative clarity of the weather. To my surprise, Shiva himself actually looks away from Phewa Lake, across to the moutainscapes behind, but this hadn't been at all evident from back in the guest house.

So, eventually to lunch, which Ishwor suggested we should take at one of the many different establishments he knows, this one really beautifully located deep in a green valley surrounded by lush forests and fields, aptly named The Farm. It's one of the few to boast that distinguishing feature, an Infinity pool and not exactly in the standard tourist budget price range. No matter, we ordered coffee, which was excellent and then progressed to lunch, or brunch given the still early time. I made covert plans to return before long and spend a couple of days here as a personal retreat, away from the humdrum of the guest house and its other friendly, if not always peaceful residents.

> The weather closed in again not long afterwards and it's been raining non stop for nearly two days now, underlining the importance of being responsive to the moment. The end of August approaches and with the coming of September and early autumn, I am reminded of that time a whole year ago now, back in Uttarakhand, when six long months of the first India lockdown ended and I travelled up to Gangotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath. It's starting to acquire the same feeling with the same calling, so I hope before long when the monsoon finally ends, I shall be on my way to ancient Muktinath temple, in the remote mountainous province of Mustang."

Shortly after, I moved down to stay at the Farm for three nights for a complete change of scene. It did feel rather in the order of a guilty luxury given the expense of the place and not exactly conforming to a renunciate's view of the spiritual life, but it gave me a much needed break from the whole Greenhills living scenario and a chance to reset my defaults, which the earlier excursions to Sarankgot and then Ghandruk clearly had not been able to do. I knew I needed to draw a line under that first period of being in Nepal and move on. Taking my leave of the Brazilian yogis was happily less fraught than I might have feared given our recent clash over the hashish smoke. They were downstairs in the guest house dining room, next to the yoga hall when I looked for them to say goodbye. We all managed to be nice to each other and parted on good enough terms, though I imagine my departure was likely a relief for them too.

At the Farm, the weird pressure I had ever felt under at Greenhills, with the sense of alien forces lapping constantly at my personal shores finally caught up with me, and I succumbed to the rather frightening inward apprehension of having barely survived exposure to something that came close to feeling malign, feelings which had in no way anything whatever to do with the family who ran the hotel I should point out.
After three days' rest and rebalancing myself, I moved on again to the Lakeside district and eventually found myself a more suitable small hotel close to the lake itself – the Orchid hotel.

Despite its being advanced into August with increasing relaxation of international travel restrictions, there were still few enough other travellers from overseas and, being

practically empty, I had my pick of rooms at the Orchid and chose one with a view straight out towards Annapurna. It was a relief – finally – to be based somewhere so different and now within easy access of the centre of town and choice of cafes to write in.

Mustang and the Road to Salvation

Throughout my stay in Greenhills, Ishwor had often spoken of Mustang – the distant high altitude province in Nepal close to the Tibetan border, the very mention of which held a kind of mystique. He was planning to go there come the end of the monsoon, ostensibly to visit the famous pilgrimage destination of Muktinath, and I decided that I, too, should endeavour to go. Trips to Tadapani and Ghandruk had felt like testing the waters (literally in the monsoon times I went to them) for something more challenging beyond it. But it would be October before I would be able to visit there, itself meaningful given October has generally been the month of my mystical experiences across many years, and the month the previous year when I had made the three separate visits to the Uttarakhand yatra temples. From the Orchid hotel, I finally made preparations for my visit, hiring a land rover with driver given that local flights to the capital Jomsom were still suspended. I didn't want to have to share a vehicle either given my experiences of shared travel earlier, so I decided to foot the bill for the journey myself, not inconsiderable, but important given my need for peace and privacy when preparing myself for a spiritual journey.

The Road to Salvation: Ascent[32]

> "The Sanskrit word "Mukti" (also Moksha) broadly translates as 'salvation'. In Eastern religions and theological traditions with their implicit belief in reincarnation, salvation is understood rather differently to the way it is in Christianity, with its emphasis on hellfire and damnation. Salvation here means freedom from the otherwise eternal cycle of reincarnation, envisaged as a wheel called 'samsara'. To be caught eternally in this endless cycle of death and rebirth is inevitably seen as a kind of hell, a process of eternal suffering that life as a human being on earth can involve. Depending upon the kinds of life one has led in the material world, one will

[32] See: The Road to Salvation: Ascent

accrue good or bad karma and this will govern the nature of one's rebirth. Eventually it is believed possible that a soul (atma) which has become sufficiently enlightened, and purified of karmic debts, can finally escape this wheel to return to their spiritual home, being 'God', the Supreme, the Self.

In Hindu and some Buddhist traditions, there are places here on earth which can advance this process, shrines and temples dedicated to one deity or another, and undertaking pilgrimage to these with all the costs and hardships that such a journey might entail, will guarantee Mukti. In the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand, the sites of Yamunotri, Gangotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath are ancient sacred pilgrimage destinations of such a kind. In Nepal, Muktinath is another, attracting thousands of pilgrims annually.

I had visited three of the four Chota Char Dham sites towards the end of my year long stay in India last year in the month of October, concluding with a visit to the sublime ancient high altitude temple of Kedarnath, dedicated to Shiva. Arriving in Nepal, it seemed a given therefore that Muktinath, the famed ancient temple dedicated to Vishnu, would conclude my cycle of pilgrimage visits, and thence I set my sights.

Arriving into Nepal in mid June, it would entail a three month wait before this would be possible however, given the duration and severity of the annual monsoon which made any kind of distance travel a major undertaking. Permanently and densely clouded skies and heavy rains also meant that it would be weeks before the inspirational high snow-capped Himalayan peaks were visible, more than just an occasional fleeting, tantalising glimpse.

Muktinath is located in the remote province of Mustang, close to the border with Tibet, and at an altitude of some 3,800 m elevation, higher even than the Uttarakhand sites which all tend to be at around some 3,500 m and this can challenge the traveller with the penetrating cold and the effects of the altitude. Entering Mustang is like travelling to a different world, a country where ancient legends and daily reality can seem indistinguishable and where the age old traditions of life and beliefs in the cosmos are still very much alive.

Given the protracted Coronavirus restrictions still in operation over the summer had closed down domestic air traffic, certainly between Pokhara and the Mustang capital Jomsom, the only feasible way to get there was by jeep, a journey at best some eight hours in duration. The thought wasn't a happy one, but given that all travel into the region had once entailed extended hikes of over a week's duration before the construction of the road, then one couldn't really complain. We have all become too used to the convenience of air travel. In days of old, up until not so very long ago in fact, pilgrimages inevitably involved the hardships of many weeks travelling; that always was part of the experience. When I had visited Kedarnath the previous year, there were helicopter shuttles operating between low Kedarnath and the high temple, otherwise only a hike of some 17 km would get you there, so I always felt I had been cheating rather to opt for the shuttle, even if it did mean that many more folk – the aged, infirm and very young, and people like myself who were on restricted schedules and unaccustomed to long distance hiking, were now able to reach the temple and achieve darshan than before.

I decided to travel on 1st October, which was the anniversary of my visit to Gangotri the previous year, and start of the cycle of visits that had concluded at Kedarnath. It seemed appropriate and auspicious. I hired a private vehicle as I couldn't deal with the thought of being stuffed into the jeep with lots of other people. Preparing oneself for the goal, at least for me, generally entails ring fencing my solitude and privacy. Back in the summer, I had travelled up to Ghandruk, and despite having hired the vehicle privately, found myself hosting several people, family members of the person who had organised the jeep for me and their friends, and they had all talked loudly throughout the entire journey. When we had disembarked at Ghandruk and I had transferred to a pack horse, the lady of the guest house where I was to stay accompanying us had continued to talk loudly with the guide all the way to the final destination of Tadopani. For folk like me who need their peace and space, I had found it invasive and annoying and it had interfered with that sense of deep communion with the journey and then with the natural surroundings that for me always constitutes such a critical part of any such travel.

Peace and space apart, the journey up to Jomsom, regional capital of Mustang, was challenging enough. What passed for a road had been effectively destroyed in many places by the severity of the recent rains and there had been little opportunity to do more than clear the worst landslides to allow some passage of traffic. Everywhere the road merged with rivers pouring off the mountain slopes, or disappeared into sumps of mud, where vehicles lacking four wheel drive might sink irrevocably. The line of traffic our jeep became a part of regularly stalled as one or another vehicles became stuck and needed help to get out.

Passengers were frequently forced to get out and walk a distance to save the vehicle weight. The endless lurching from one side to another along the uneven stony ground, bouncing painfully off the jeep side became hard to endure. Eventually we reached the higher altitudes, and the strange bleak landscape of Mustang greeted us, with the flat clay roofed stone built houses, apple orchards, the herds of long haired and horned goats blocking the roads, Buddhist monasteries with gilded turrets and red robed lamas, high cave shrines and tombs, and finally a sighting of my very first yaks.

Jomsom was still a good two hour bone shaking drive further, but the end of this first stage was happily in sight.

Jomsom

The journey upwards took some ten hours in total, with a brief stop for lunch, and we rattled into Jomsom at six in the evening, just as the light was starting to fade. No city this, more an extended village of mainly traditional houses which, being the location of the airport, had expanded a little to accommodate the increase in tourist traffic, now at an effective end since the arrival of the pandemic. It was a relief to finally be there and after a dish of the regional speciality momos, and hot sweet milky masala tea to revive the travel weary, I settled into a small room at the Trekkers Inn thankfully and waited for my world to stop moving.

The window of my room looked out directly onto the still deserted airstrip and, beyond that, the snowy heights of Nilgrili. It was cold and the landscape otherwise barren, the stark

mountain sides dotted with sparse shrubs. Set back from the one main street and its traffic, it was at least blissfully quiet here, unlike busy noisy Lakeside Pokhara. I decided to spend another whole day and night here to rest before attempting the onward journey up to Muktinath.

The Road to Salvation: Paris in Jomsom[33]

> "The following morning after breakfast, I wandered around in the sunshine and checked out the main part of town, slightly further along from the airport side along a dusty unpaved road that passed for the high street. Apart from some administrative looking buildings in the modern part of town on the far side of the river and a large army encampment, there was little else bar the traditional stone built, flat clay roofed houses and stores, and, of course, the ubiquitous guest houses and small hotels.
>
> Jeeps, mainstay of regional transport, were everywhere, parked in the transport terminal or rattling along the street; and, of course, many of the colourfully dressed and distinctive looking local folk, native to this region. Large black Himalayan mountain dogs or versions thereof, small brown cattle and occasional herds of sheep and goats roamed, scratched, slept, barked or bleated their way through the streets to add to the vibrancy of the scene.
>
> "Eagles, whistling thinly on the high mountain airs, soared overhead and the river, grey and heavy with silt and still swollen from the recent excessive rains rushed noisily through the town centre, hemmed in by the barren mountain heights on every side. It was a shock to see how stark and arid the region was though, after the lushness of the land at the lower elevations, human wrought deforestation being the likely culprit, as certainly there are still areas up on the mountain slopes where spruce forests survive.
>
> "There being little else to do, I returned after awhile, intent on finding a café, as even in these remote regions, good coffee can still on occasion be found. And so I happened upon a piece of pure Paris in the unlikely setting of Mustang's Jomsom. It

[33] See: The Road to Salvation: Paris in Jomsom

felt like one of those Sci-Fi or Fantasy films where you open a door and find yourself in a completely different world.

“A few years back, during the artist and writer stage of my life, I used to be a regular visitor to that consummate City of Lovers; I even wrote a poem dedicated to it with that title. Lover of the wilderness and Indigenous, traditional cultures as I am, there will ever be a small, significant place in my heart dedicated to Paris. Once, on a cold wet January afternoon in Saint Germain de Prés, I had passed a café looking all warm and inviting with the sign ‘Jazzy and Cosy’ written in the window. In I went, needless to say. The Himalayan Java Coffee Café in Jomsom was a piece of that: jazzy and cosy. Warm jazzy music was indeed playing as I went in, a small café which doubled as an art gallery, the walls covered with really excellent paintings of the region and people, executed in a neo Impressionist style, a style very close to my heart. Part of the Parisian experience for me always consisted of at least one visit to the Musée d’Orsay, home to many famous Impressionist and Post Impressionist paintings.

“I fell into conversation with one of the guys running the place called Sanish Maharjan, who turned out to be one of the artists too, a fine watercolourist, the other (Dhwoj Gurung) being currently resident in Kathmandu. We talked about art and my own experiences as an artist, and then many things, and his companion Mahendra Gurung, who works as chef in the hotel restaurant there joined us. In response to my showing interest in the electronic keyboard, Sanish sat down and started to play. Firstly he played a piece of classical piano music that sounded rather like Chopin (I recognised the piece but couldn’t name it). He played beautifully and it seemed surreal to hear this music in the high street of Jomsom of all places! Then Mahendra joined in as percussionist on his instruments and there evolved there some of the best music I’ve heard. It was quite extraordinary, really mesmerising and I began to feel that I was there as much to meet them and experience their music, than just waiting overnight for the next stage of my journey.

“I returned to the café later that evening and we walked up the street to an old house turned bar they own, when the night scene takes over from the day. It transpired that Sanish is actually a classical guitar player (played some fabulous Flamenco style music amongst a wide range) and has recently taken up the saxophone too, which means he plays three of my favourite instruments. Before the

evening progressed bringing more people with it, I relaxed and enjoyed a homemade pizza and a wide range of their musical talents, finishing with some excellent saxophone music, before it was time to take my leave.

"The next morning I was off to Muktinath to conclude the last stage of my journey on the Road to Salvation. But when I came back down the street that night from the bar, cold and dark by then, the wind blowing, with few folk around and the occasional dog, it reminded me strangely of those evenings in Paris, where I used to stay in a small hotel along the Rue de la Huchette in the Latin Quarter, when I would come back late from the famous Caveau de la Huchette jazz club, not Jomsom in Mustang at all …

A cold night huddled under heavy blankets, with chill trips to the bathroom in the middle of the night brought me back to reality. I breakfasted early back in the Trekker's Inn and then found my transport waiting for me outside – a battered old car – that was to take me on the final leg of my journey up to Muktinath.

The Road to Salvation: Muktinath[34]

"I set off the following morning at ten, in a beat up car that passed for a taxi. After the gruelling ten hours' drive up from Pokhara, it was only around an hour and a half to Muktinath on roads that were at least navigable. As we left Jomsom, the stark bleached arid mountainscapes unfolded on every side, the road defined by a wide river course leading back into the mountains.

The road up to Muktinath took a sharp turn at the ancient village of Kagbeni and we started the steep climb to the temple town, gaining a full thousand metres in a mere twenty minutes, finally arriving into the medieval turned modern tourist resort, to be greeted by three of my old friends: ugly noisy modern construction, altitude stress and cold.

My capacity to endure high altitude has sadly diminished with time, though I suspect it was never ever particularly robust. I was forced to concede this having booked a

[34] See: The Road to Salvation: Muktinath

New Year’s trip to Copacabana and La Paz in Bolivia a few years back, only to realise at Puno, Titicaca that it was all sadly beyond me, so back I went ignominiously to Lima. That was at 4000m of altitude and Muktinath is only some 200m below that. And cold is always a problem for me, I’m a temperate to tropical climate person and even living in Britain has its problems. Priorities change under these circumstances; the attractions of hanging around naked in a chill bathroom waiting for the icy shower water to gain a little warmth loses its appeal, whilst winter woollies make their debut appearance from the suitcase.

I had booked with the Grand Shambhala Hotel, but there were in fact many hotels and guesthouses around, and many more under construction, consequent on the one time busy pilgrimage traffic. Many had been closed for months because of the pandemic, and some still were. The influence of western tourism betrayed itself everywhere with oddly name establishments like the Bob Marley Hotel, boasting an Australian chef; globalisation had well and truly arrived. The first few hours there were wiped out with a migraine headache, consequent on the high altitude I imagine, but later that afternoon I roused myself and went out to scope out the town and the goal of my journey, the temple. The town itself was unremarkable enough, although set in an expansive green well irrigated valley, surrounded by the barren high mountains. As I neared the temple, my heart sunk as I saw an immense long flight of steps ascending the mountain side toward the temple at the top. It would have been daunting at any altitude, but especially here at such a height. The late afternoon sunshine illuminated the sweeping vista of the green valley spread out below with its irrigated orchards and trees turning golden with the approach of autumn, the high mountain silhouettes wreathed with luminous clouds on every side.

In the end I decided to stay just a night and leave after making the temple visit the following morning. The hotel staff were friendly and obliging and the bed at least warm and comfortable, so I settled in for the night and tried not to feel too intimidated at the thought of what the morning would bring. I had arranged to get a lift to the main temple entrance on a motorbike, but thereafter I was on my own to make it up the long flights of steps to the top, attired in my scarlet temple finery.

Before the pandemic had effectively shut down pilgrimage traffic, there used to be packhorses available to transport those unfit to climb, but no more!”

The Road to Salvation: The Goal[35]

“Morning duly dawned. Amongst a series of nightmares that night, I had also dreamt that I would forget the flowers I had bought for the temple down in Kagbeni. Customarily you find stalls selling garlands and flowers for temple offerings outside Hindu temples, but at this height there are few flowers of the sort standardly used. I dressed in my new bought outfit, sorted out what I needed to take and set off downstairs for the motorbike lift, realising after we had set off that I had indeed left the flowers in a glass back in my room! So far, so good.

The long flights of steps were waiting for me beyond the arched portal, lined with colourfully dressed sadhus, who spend their life either wandering the roads or hanging out at temples like this one, living off the proceeds of the offerings they get from the temple visitors. Dragging myself up flight after flight, gasping for air and stopping to rest regularly, I must have made an odd spectacle, as much though because, as usual, I was the one obviously foreign looking devotee clearly intent on making puja. This has ever been my experience, and it’s something I always find a horrible challenge, to be so conspicuous, attracting the interest of all the other manifestly Hindu worshippers. I have had it at just about every temple I’ve ever visited, and particularly difficult to arrive, resplendent in a saree as I was at the ancient Krishna temple at Guruvayur, Kerala, India, to be denied entrance by the Brahmin priests officiating because of being a foreigner. Then, perforce, having to make my puja at a red plastic chair cum mocked up altar outside the entrance, all under the curious a gaze of hundreds of other visitors coming and going.

I made it to the top more rapidly than anticipated, still in one piece, and even managed to pick a small bunch of wild flowers along the way, to replace those left back in my room. At the top you entered under another archway into the main precincts of the temple, where old gnarled trees grew everywhere and a fast flowing stream coursed through. Smaller temples and Buddhist shrines were visible here

[35] See: The Road to Salvation: The Goal

and there, but the main temple dedicated to Shree Vishnu lay further at the top. And so into the temple courtyard itself, already by then full of devotees preparing for their own pujas, or stripping off to bathe in the large cisterns of spring water, itself supposed to guarantee mukti. Two girls invited me to join them in bathing, but I politely declined. People are generally very interested in and welcoming of foreign devotees when they see you are serious and respectful of their faith. There were fonts of water gushing out at one end of the courtyard, so I threw water over my head from these instead of bathing, before removing my shoes (a must to enter Hindu sacred places) and entering the inner sanctum and the small temple to Shree Vishnu. This, finally, was the height and goal of my journey on the Road to Salvation!

There are formal pujas to Hindu divinities officiated by Brahmins, which might be communal, or individual if contracted by a worshipper or family. When I had made my two hour long Rudrabishek puja to Shiva at Varanasi, I had hired three Brahmins to conduct the formal offices and guide me in what was required. The problem with being a foreigner not brought up in the Hindu tradition is that you lack the necessary knowledge of the ritual formalities required and the order of them. Most people I have found are very tolerant and accommodating and forgive your ignorance, but I am aware that it could also be a cause for offence, so I do try to be careful and respectful. That said, I also believe that small private ceremonies of the kind many people like to conduct, including the lighting of small lamps, burning incense sticks and offering of flowers and fruits, is still acceptable. This I did here, amongst the many who were engaged in their own private ceremonies in different parts of the temple's small quadrangle.

The upper hatch of the door to the main shrine had been opened, revealing the elaborately dressed statue of the deity inside, with an attendant alongside who received the small wildflower bouquet from me as my offering. In the eclectic Hindu traditions, there is an implicit belief that these divine representations contain the essence of whichever god or goddess they represent, and engaging with a process whereby you look at it, perhaps also touch it if this is allowed, is called 'Darshan', which loosely means that you have apprehended the deity and It has you in a kind of mutual acknowledgement: to see and be seen. Although not the same, the

closest to this might be something like the Christian communion, wherein Christians believe that by imbibing the sanctified wine and eating the host, they have mystically connected with God. The point is this: these are rituals which engage with the deeper unconscious of the devotee and the experience is a combination of a process of belief by the rational mind, underpinned by transcendent or mystical irrational feelings/experiences that give it that essential sense of authenticity and legitimacy. I have written about what the concept of faith means and how it is experienced elsewhere.

And so it was over. I emerged from the inner temple, collected my few belongings, put my shoes back on and then prepared to leave. Just below the main Vishnu temple there was a smaller temple dedicated to Shiva, and so I went there too, as I count myself more a devotee of Shiva. But in the end my own belief is that these divine representations are simply that: different ways that human beings conceptualise something beyond conception, often guided by ancient traditions that can be traced many hundreds of years back in time, as the main Hindu traditions can be. It's all as the famous Sioux 'Medicine Man' Black Elk, who converted to Catholicism as an older man, said when questioned about his beliefs: 'they are simply different expressions of the same Sacred Reality'.

Walking back down the long flights of steps, I then had to run the gauntlet of the many colourfully dressed sadhus lining the way. I had brought a certain amount of smaller denomination money with me, but hadn't counted on how many there were. No matter, it transpired that change could be given, as I learned when one pulled out a thick packet of notes to oblige me. They operate in some ways rather like a syndicate and appear to share resources. Although I have certainly heard enough stories of rich sadhus on the make, I should also point out that many are quite authentic and content to live a relatively simple and often hard life walking the roads and begging for food. One man I saw had lost both his hands at some point in his life, therefore I imagine that a life of sanctified mendicancy was pretty much all that was left to him to survive and retain his dignity. Sadhus, as far as I am aware are, however, mainly associated with the ancient Shivaite tradition, but clearly see nothing contradictory to their hanging out at temples dedicated to other divinities. Shivaite sadhus are also well known for their pursuit of siddhis (occult powers) and

their smoking of hashish as part of their own ritual means of communion. There was certainly enough hashish being smoked here too!

So I strolled back through the little town, past the Bob Marley Hotel and back to Shambhala, finished my packing and bundled myself and my luggage into another beat up old car, to be driven back down to warmer climes and more hospitable altitudes in the village of Kagbeni, where two nights at the oddly named Yac Donalds hotel and restaurant awaited."

The Road to Salvation: Strange Proverbs and Threshold Guardians[36]

It was a short drive down to Kagbeni, a small village cum town that, given its strategic location between Jomsom and Muktinath, has likely served as a staging post for pilgrimage traffic across the centuries, given the town itself is some eight hundred years old.

I had been aware of Yac Donalds for some time, as it's one of the few hotels to appear in online searches for the region, but its name, and the many photos posted by other travellers from pre coronavirus days, had not inclined me to want to stay there. There being few other establishments open at that time, I bowed to the inevitable however and had the taxi driver take me there. It was, in fact, a family run hotel in a large rambling traditional house which had been converted some years ago into its current form. I found the rather lurid colour scheme of orange, green and red a bit off putting; also the household dog, being a large, attractive, but poorly socialised husky, that rapidly took advantage of its freedom to roam and any interest shown by travellers to get into everything and everywhere.

The family were nice and friendly however, and there were already some other travellers – cyclists from China – staying there. The old fashioned guest rooms needed a little upgrading, but were cheap and comfortable enough and I was only there for two days anyway. The establishment's name was a play on the fact that

[36] See: The Road to Salvation: Strange Proverbs and Threshold Guardians

the restaurant's speciality was yak burgers and yak dishes in general, although I had thought that yak meat was, in fact, illegal, from my time spent several weeks earlier up in Ghandruk. Given that yaks are a species of cattle, their meat is indistinguishable from beef anyway.

Many places in Nepal and particularly Mustang, have a healthy mix of religions, evidenced by Hindu temples and Buddhist shrines and monasteries co existing. The family of the hotel were themselves Buddhist and had nearly finished constructing a small bright temple in the house for private worship when I arrived. There was a large Buddhist monastery in Kagbeni and you would hear the sound of the monks chanting at different times, but especially in the early morning.

The following day I went for a wander up into the medieval part of town, a fascinating quarter of ancient tumbledown stone and clay houses, connected by labyrinthine passage ways everywhere, and where, quite unexpectedly, I turned a corner and happened upon a large strange intimidating figure from more ancient times, which I identified as being a threshold guardian. These characters are of necessity frightening looking statuary which serve to protect householders from evil spirits. With his grotesque face, prominent genitals, and large sword he was likely very effective in doing this! There seemed to be something significant too about dancing yaks. I had observed a hotel with the name in Jomsom, then again in Kagbeni, where what I presumed to be an old proverb was displayed on a sign above the door: When the clouds' Shadow meets the wind and yaks start to dance, the[n] wisdom sits on the earth.

Which seemed a combination of such unlikely happenings as to fairly guarantee (and likely explain) why our earth seems so devoid of wisdom!

The village is on the banks of the Kali Gandaki river, which marks the effective border between Low Mustang, accessible to foreigners, and High Mustang on the Tibetan border, requiring complex expensive trekking permits to enter. It's a strange and beautiful region of high arid mountainscapes, juxtaposed with deep irrigated green valleys, where apples and maize are grown. The region is famous for its apple brandy in fact, a local affordable hooch that the majority of folk hereabouts

enjoy. I even saw a bottle of it (and was invited to drink some) during the final stages of preparations for the Buddhist chapel in the hotel. It is a completely clear, rather viscous, and nearly tasteless sort of drink, but with an after effect like a yak has kicked you; however, very effective in warding off boredom and the cold I imagine. I had first tried some the previous year up in Gangotri and also been offered it back in Ghandruk at a local family luncheon.

The morning I left to return to Jomsom coincided with the annual two day festival of Amavasya Tithi Shradda, when the deceased are honoured with pujas by their surviving relatives. It accounted for why the entire town including Yac Donalds had recently filled up with large numbers of travellers. The river bank was crowded with groups of people engaged in conducting their pujas for deceased family members, a vibrant and colourful scene and I was reminded of the famous Día de los Difuntos (Day of the Dead) festivities in Latin American countries, which serve a very similar purpose.

Back in Jomsom, I had to plan my return journey back to Pokhara, but a combination of circumstances and bad weather conspired to make taking a shared jeep back inevitable. And so, after a final day and evening spent enjoying the society, coffee and music of my two friends Sanish and Mahendra[37], I took my leave and prepared to return to the lower elevations and Phewa Lake. Another long tiring journey ensued of some eleven hours in duration, marked by the usual challenges and interruptions, but we made it finally into Pokhara by nightfall. My adventures on the road to salvation were finally over!”

[37] https://elizabethcurrie.info/2021/10/15/the-road-to-salvation-paris-in-jomsom/

End of the Road

I was to spend rather longer, around a month, in Nepal before circumstances and visa restrictions conspired to force my return to the UK, where another period of just over three months would ensue. I stayed on for awhile in Lakeside and made one more puja, this time at the Kedareshwor Shiva temple, before making plans to return to Kathmandu, flying from Pokhara.

Leaving Lakeside[38]

> “My time in Nepal is approaching its end. On Tuesday I am due to fly back to Kathmandu, ahead of leaving the country.
>
> As usual when you are confronting the end of a period of time spent anywhere, you get many flashbacks to different times and experiences. So, the first two months were spent in Greenhills guest house up a mountain road some distance from Phewa Lake, with fine views over the forested hills, and the giant statue of Shiva in the distance, overlooking us all. My posts then were all about sitting out the monsoon (which has pretty much defined my stay in Nepal) and watching the passing of the days from my balcony, the village people tending their fields, the mongooses playing hide and seek with the chickens and occasional visits further afield, when I went first up to Sarankgot, then further afield to Tadapani and Ghandruk. I had scarcely seen the mountains at all then, as day succeeded day with nothing but dense clouds everywhere.
>
> The second stage has been down by the lake side itself, a bustling area of tourist shops, restaurants and cafes. For weeks the area was nearly empty, there being few visitors at all owing to the impact of the pandemic on travel. Now, since returning from Muktinath, you see foreign visitors everywhere, itself a bit of shock, and also large numbers of Nepali and Indian people on vacation. The place has come alive and feels very different to the way it did when I was first here.

[38] See: Leaving Lakeside

There are generally mixed feelings about anywhere and no less here. There have been good times and times which felt more difficult. The trip up to Mustang and Muktinath, in the end, have proved to be the defining goal of my time here, and why I came, although at the beginning and for a long time I had no real sense of any higher objective, beyond wanting to go up into the mountains.

From my hotel balcony here on Lakeside, I have watched a different set of neighbours about their daily lives, still pretty much defined by the traditional agricultural cycles of harvesting, ploughing and planting, even here in the urban centre. Take away the many hotels and guest houses everywhere and indeed all you would be left with would be a relatively small town of people living in the age old ways, as Pokhara, and especially this district Lakeside, is really a city of hotels and restaurants and little else. So, after watching the maize being harvested, and then the ploughing with oxen, yesterday I watched my neighbours planting potatoes, another Andean native to have become a staple crop in the Himalayas.

I have finished my website and published it and I have now applied for a new visa to return to India, and from there, a whole new stage of the Pilgrimage which is, in fact, my life. Time moves on …”

Arriving into Kathmandu, I returned to the Yeti hotel briefly, but found that the intervening months had greatly hiked its prices, and the vibe from its owners didn’t endear me to staying longer either, so I repaired to the district of Patan, and a nice hotel right on the edge of the Durbar Square there, a mere stroll from some of Kathmandu’s most important historical buildings. Observing the local Diwali festivities here in Nepal reminded me of the previous year when I returned from India, driving through the night to Delhi airport, and seeing all the buildings festooned with lights. Here was no different, with every house sporting the small clay lamps and intricate coloured powder designs on doorsteps everywhere.

Diwali[39]

“I returned to Kathmandu two days ago and am now back in the hotel with the large yeti in the back garden. It seems strange being back here after a full and very eventful five months further up country in Pokhara and the Annapurna district.
My return has coincided with the Diwali Festival of Lights and everywhere families are decorating their homes, and buildings are festooned with strings of multicoloured lights. Yesterday I walked back to historical Durbar Square, along the bustling chaotic thoroughfare of the Chhatrapati, Thamel district of the city where I am staying and where you see people living a more traditional way of life.

I had last visited Durbar Square back at the end of June, when I had been the only visible foreigner given the limitations of international travel at that time. I have seen far more recently with the relaxation of restrictions, but I still seemed to be the only non resident in the square that day.

The place was crowded with people intent on buying or selling goods for the festival and everywhere there were stalls and stands selling garlands and bouquets of flowers, fruits, sweets and many decorative items.

I had learned that the eve of the main festival is devoted to honouring the household dog, followed by the cow, then the buffalo and finally when sisters and brothers give each other the traditional ritual red tikka mark on the forehead, commonly observed after people have visited the temple. For dog day, dogs are also given a tikka and a garland to wear.

It was a wonderful, bright and vibrant scene of the sort found in Christmas markets in Western countries, if a lot warmer. Sadhus sat sunning themselves, throngs of pigeons flew everywhere, hosts of motorcyclists and bicyclists vied with pedestrians. The scene veritably buzzed with life.

I had already taken many photos of the different historical buildings, ravaged by the effects of the 2015 earthquake, during my first visit back in June. So, after a happy

[39] See: Diwali

hour soaking up the brightness, the noise and the air of festivity, I retreated to the cool quiet of a café close by and a cup of definitely non traditional expresso!”

Leaving the City of Temples[40]

“When I first arrived into Kathmandu mid June, I had no idea how long I would be in Nepal, what I would do, or where I would travel to. I knew I wanted to go up into the mountains again, having fallen in love with them the previous year when I was living in Uttarakhand India. At that was about it. I have documented my travels from the time I was freed from the then mandatory quarantine, starting with Kathmandu and Durbar Square, so it’s apt that I finish here too, on the eve of my departure back to the UK.

These last few days since leaving Lakeside, I have re-experienced the city during the Diwali Festival, and then yesterday moved to Lalitpur, the historical city of Patan, now effectively a district of metropolitan Kathmandu. It’s an extraordinary place, the Patan Durbar Square full of immense tiered temples dedicated to different divinities. Everywhere the process of restoration is underway, following the devastating 2015 earthquake. Some buildings are finished, many others still literally under wraps or else covered with scaffolding.

Diwali is over now and everywhere getting back to normal. Doorsteps still have the colourful decorative mandalas, if now looking a little faded, as are the red tikkas on the dogs’ heads.

My original plan to go onto (or back to) India has been thwarted by the arcane complications of visa application and border crossings, so it’s back to the UK and to York, if briefly, take stock of all I have seen and learned these last five months and see what bright new possibilities then emerge!

A final farewell and thank you to all the wonderful people here who have enriched my life and experiences throughout my stay. Nepal is such a beautiful country and my adventures on the Road to Salvation and to Muktinath truly amazing.”

[40] See: Leaving the City of Temples

As I packed myself together and prepared to depart for the airport, I was yet blissfully unaware of a nasty sting in the tale that Kathmandu and Nepal had in store for me, before I could finally board the flight back. Along the highway, we passed a pedestrian sporting a T shirt with the large words written conspicuously for me to see “Sorry”! And I instantly felt a sort of sickening dread that something unpleasant was in store that the Universe was flagging up in advance as it were. I counselled myself that it was nonsense, and tried to forget it until, queuing up to enter Departures at the terminal, I (and many others it should be noted) was stopped with a demand for a valid negative PCR test. There was simply no progressing further without one. I had done some considerable research ahead of my departure to find out what the requirements were, given I had some experience by now of travelling through the pandemic years. But by this time many governments and airlines were already dropping this requirement. The previous year leaving India, in November 2020, I had taken care to get a test ahead of returning to the UK, but it had never been required at any point along the way, either in India or re-entering the UK. This time I had double checked with the airline, as well as all the on-line government information respecting travel, but there had been nothing giving notice of this, so, and in hindsight clearly unwisely, I had decided to waive it. Getting pcr tests done anywhere was always awkward depending upon identifying a suitable laboratory, getting to it, and so on.

I cannot begin to describe the sense of sickening helplessness, confusion and anger that overwhelmed me at that point. Fantasies of barging ahead through the departures entry anyway were clearly foolish, and I didn’t know what to do. I was indicated a line of buildings in the distance across the other side of two car parks where I was told I could find labs that were doing the tests. Then a kindly older Indian couple, who had just returned with their own required documentation, explained what was needed to me and, evidently taking pity on my clearly desperate state, offered to take me there, at least the lady did, couriering me across the car parks to the where they had recently been themselves. I understood their own flight was shortly to depart, so my gratitude at this compassionate act was impossible to convey. All I could say over and over was “God bless you!”

There were large numbers of other hapless travellers hanging around the handful of temporary labs who had been caught out by the same demand. I was waived to one of the reception areas and queued up, feeling dazed and as though in some nightmare, to order and pay for the test. I had just enough cash given I had decided last minute at the hotel to pay for my restaurant bill with a bank card and not the remaining cash I had, which saved me, as the labs only took cash. After the swabs had been taken, the awful wait ensued, which was to be the full three hours I was told it would take. I was counselled that I was, in fact, one of the ‘lucky ones’ given I did have just enough time, when apparently many people lost their flights. Other than some extreme and culpable incompetence on behalf of the government or airport authorities, it seemed to me to be some kind of scam or other, given the lack of any notification in advance of travel and the fact that so many other travellers were being caught out in this way.

Three hours ground interminably by, with me either trying to sit it out, or mostly pacing around backwards and forward like a tiger in a cage, struggling to keep myself calm in the manner I felt that all my previous spiritual practice should have given me. But possibly it did, as at least I didn’t collapse into hysterical tears or rage. All I could think about was the fact that I had maxed out on all my financial reserves and if I lost this flight, then I would have nothing left to get another; or to continue my stay in Nepal, where my tourist visa was already approaching the maximum duration of time allowed. There are times when all control is taken from us and we are thrown completely onto the ground of faith, and this was such a one. I knew and told myself repeatedly, that this was all part of the required challenge, that my journey was still my Pilgrimage, and that I owed all that I was, had and all that I did to God, and nothing else. And I would do my best to accept whatever happened and just keep that faith.

The negative test result eventually came through and a kind security guard then helped me with my case to recross the two car parks, dark by then, back to departures. And I negotiated the gate and presented myself at check in with just twenty minutes left before it closed. A miss is as good as a mile so the saying goes, but I felt it had taken years off my life anyway! In my heart and to this day I see it as part of what is understood in psychological and also spiritual developmental life stage terms as being a ‘rite of passage’. They are generally experienced as awful as their purpose serves to break with old patterns

and life stages passed and clear the way for new ones ahead, by marking a clear boundary. Rite of passage then it was, and most certainly it had felt terrible!
I had the rest of my journey to recover and eventually arrived back into the UK. But, and to this day, I remember that experience in Kathmandu airport as being one of the most stressful I experienced during those Pilgrimage years, indeed ever in many ways. The following year and back in India and Rishikesh again, I was to have another, albeit very different in nature, to be recounted in the chapters devoted to that time.

……

Part Three.

To dream again

In my several subsequent returns to India since 2020, every year in fact, excepting for 2021 when I went to Nepal, I was never able to re-engage in any real, certainly in any lasting way with the spirit and energies, the magic of 2020. I was to learn, with sadness and frustration, that once the pandemic threat finally receded, modern life rebounded with almost a savageness, determined to make up for the privations of that time. The Ganges returned to being for thrill seekers, the narrow roads up into the high mountains were crammed with cars and buses taking weekend trippers, careless of the pilgrims. That brief space for air and light and for Nature to recover, was swept away in the determined grab back of consumerism and convenience living. For all its strangeness and challenge, and certainly for some folk tragedy even, I realised that I had, in fact, been so blessed in that year. I had been able to see these extraordinary places at a time when very few people were travelling, only a few other dedicated pilgrims. And I had always been the only foreigner amongst the other local visitants. I was never again to be able to enjoy these places in the same way, but I realised that I should in fact be simply grateful for those exceptional times that seemed to open up and offer a different space, a different world order and reality with it, that allowed me to experience it as I had.

From this perspective of several years on, the two principal years of Pilgrimage 2020 and 2021 therefore stand out as being extraordinary and probably unrepeatable, despite fleeting experiences, tantalising and tormenting, in the time which followed, which ever lured me back to those places where I had touched the Divine. Even as hapless Caliban in the Tempest laments:

> “and then in dreaming
> The clouds methought would open and show riches
> Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
> I cried to dream again”.[41]

Probably inevitably though they had set a kind of pattern in my approach to life, understandable as I had given up all that had constituted my earlier life before I left for India in November 2019, so there was nothing really remaining in any serious way to

[41]William Shakespeare. 1623. *The Tempest*. https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/tempest/quotes/page/4/

return to anyway. And ever there was the lure, hard to resist, that I should return to those places where I had experienced such wonders and seek to engage with them again. As someone driven to understand and situate their life and experiences within a framework that makes sense of them, I sometimes wondered if, Icarus-like, perhaps I had flown too close to the sun, and had fallen back to earth again, with melted wings. In engaging directly with Divinity as I had, I had touched something inevitably beyond my capacities as a mere human being. Or possibly I had tasted some ambrosia which thereafter meant I would forever be pining for its taste. But I am more inclined now, with more insight from hindsight, to think that something different was being called for from me and that it would take time and disappointment for me to learn to approach Divinity in a different kind of way; to let go, possibly of the ‘wow’ factor of those early years and seek instead something I have learned to call ‘spiritual maturity’.

In real life terms each return to the UK coincided with winter, where I had little option but to settle back down into a semblance of the routines I had known in earlier times. But come the new year, I was ready to heed that calling again, as creatures in hibernation are woken by their deeper instincts to the turning of the seasons. In 2022, after the previous year’s period spent in Nepal, India was still frustratingly off bounds to UK citizens, who had been summarily removed from the long list of countries eligible to apply for e-visas. We had to get old fashioned ‘sticker’ visas instead, awkward, time consuming and expensive. I gave up waiting in the UK in the hopes that the situation would change and decided to find some in between location, and try to prepare myself for what India might have in store for me whenever I was able to return.

Passage to India[42]

“Last year when I went to Nepal, my journey strangely took me from Manchester to Copenhagen, Copenhagen to Istanbul, then Istanbul to Kathmandu, taking some forty hours in total. This owing to the limitations and convolutions attendant on international travel during the protracted Coronavirus pandemic at that time. The knock on effect has continued into this year given newly emergent oddities of travel still owing their origin to Covid 19. Whilst certainly freer, at least in theory, travel to India has become more difficult, a combination of new tourist visa restrictions on length of stay and limitations imposed specifically upon UK citizens, who now cannot apply for the standard e-visa. This in retaliation for our own border control’s unsympathetic treatment of Indian citizens trying to enter the UK during the then emergence of the Delta (formerly India) variant.

I had originally wanted to travel directly from Kathmandu last November, but it wasn’t to be, so I returned to the UK instead to wait for travel to become less restrictive. By February the promised easing of limitations entering India still hadn’t emerged, so I decided to move anyway and find somewhere to sit it out. And so it was I found myself on a plane from Leeds Bradford to Paphos in Cyprus, where I thought I might pass a few weeks until the situation changed.

Why Cyprus? Prosaically a combination of knockdown budget airline prices, and it being a midpoint (nearly) to India via Dubai, with reliable flights by the main carriers. I imagined spending time inland there in the mountains, perhaps visiting the old Byzantine monasteries the region is famous for, but it wasn’t to be. Cyprus is an odd place (apologies to Cypriots), expensive being a member of the EU and cold at this time of year, and this on the coast. Like many of the coastal regions of Spain and Turkey, it has become massively developed for tourism, overwhelming much of the original cultural feel of the place. Extensive developments of tourist apartments stretched soullessly along the coast line around Paphos, with big modern highways and attendant urban development that reminded me more of the US than the Mediterranean. Occasionally there were remnant pockets of former countryside with a few cedars, olive trees or small vineyards.

[42] See: Passage to India

In the end I stayed a week, making my way to Larnaca where I could get a flight to Sri Lanka, which, although still not India, was nevertheless in the same cultural climatic region, inevitably warmer and certainly a lot cheaper. So thence I went.
I will remember Cyprus for oddities like its large population of urban cats which, given generous feeding by locals and tourists alike are everywhere. Also, as a registration point for the many newly arrived refugees from Africa, trying to find a new life for themselves in what must seem like such a strange and alien culture.
Down the road from my first hotel in Paphos on the shoreline was the famous Tomb of the Kings archaeological site, dating to the Ptolemaic period some 400 years before common era (BCE). Massive rock cut tombs, some with spectacular colonnades, extended along the shoreline. I imagined how it must have been more than two thousand years ago when the funeral processions made their way from the city as it was then to the burial grounds, bearing some new member of the city's elite. Little did they know that in the distant future, this region would come to look and be as it is now in a world so changed."

Island of tea and tourism[43]

"The British love affair with tea can probably best be seen in Sri Lanka, one time island of Ceylon. Committed advocate of decolonisation as I am, I must nevertheless confess that I do find the name Ceylon more attractive and the name is far from reclusive on the island anyway, where it manifests everywhere from the national bank, to diverse businesses, hotels, retail outlets and so on.
I arrived into Colombo early evening and thankfully made it through immigration and eventually to my hotel relatively quickly, after a tiring journey that involved a twelve hour overnight stop in Dubai and another unexpected stop in Male, capital of the Maldives. From the air, the Maldives, an archipelago of some 26 atolls in the Indian Ocean, look weird, sort of like cultures in a turquoise petri dish and mostly uninhabited, so to arrive into Male, a large modern city, was rather a shock.
To dismiss Sri Lanka merely as an island of tea and tourism is actually to grossly misrepresent it, as it has an illustrious heritage independent of India and distinctly

[43] See: Island of tea and tourism

its own. It's the place where, according to the legend made famous by the epic Sanskrit poem the Ramayana, the demon king Ravana (himself misrepresented according to some) kidnapped Sri Rama's wife Sita and held her until she was rescued by her husband, an avatar of Sri Vishnu, none other than God (if you happen to be a Vaishnavite that is). Here the different faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism, with some Christianity, more or less shake along peacefully together, with some temples showing depictions of all three.

I have visited the tea plantations in southern India at Munnar, so the sight of expansive vistas of land devoted to the cultivation of tea was nothing new to me. The British might have gone, but their impact lives on in the many British names here: Sunderlands, Findlay, Norwood Estates, Edinburgh, Devon beer shop amongst many. The architectural style of this region reflects the British country estate aspirations of their founders, whilst the country bungalow style is ubiquitous. After three nights in Colombo to recover, I caught the train eastwards into the southern mountain region where many of the national parks and tea plantations may be found. It was a long journey of some nine hours duration in a trundling old fashioned train which wound its way through spectacular scenery, climbing ever higher into the mountains, arriving into Ella shortly after nightfall.

I was thankful that I had booked a guest house well away from the main town, up along a lane called Waterfall Road, with magnificent views over Ella Rock and the famous waterfall itself. It was relatively peaceful here, with a rich bird life that greeted you at dawn and continued throughout the day, together with neighbourhood strimmers and the local bread and ice-cream vendors.

What I hadn't expected was what a resort this whole region has become in recent years, especially the town Ella itself and its several neighbouring towns, which act as a magnet for holiday makers and backpackers from across the world.

It feels rather like being in a time warp here, a time before the pandemic effectively shut down tourism completely for over a year. When I left Nepal last November, there were small signs of a recovery in foreign travel under the impact of mass vaccination programmes and a little trickle of Western looking people had started to

appear, much to the delight of local businesses. I remembered the time in Kathmandu when I first arrived, when I was the only conspicuous foreigner to be seen. A year on and Ella is a bustling inland resort and centre of regional travel again, swarming with tourists who can hang out drinking in clubs and bars, enjoy Italian coffee, pasta and pizza, party til dawn, and dress and behave pretty much as they please when not trekking to the several popular locations the region is famous for. I stayed in the region for a couple of weeks before catching the train back westwards towards Colombo, breaking the journey at the famous Adam's Peak region.

A tall, oddly shaped conical mountain some 2243 m high, Adam's Peak is where legend has it that the Buddha (Lord Shiva for Hindus, Adam, or even St.Thomas if Christian) came to earth, leaving their footprint in the rock. It's a real commitment to climb it, despite there being continuous flights of steps all the way up and thousands of determined visitors do throughout the year. I am not, however, one of them. At the top there is a Buddhist monastery and temple, and mantras sung at dawn by the monks echo evocatively across the entire landscape."

After a hair raising bus trip of some nine hours duration through the lush tropical highways and byways of the central mountain regions from Nuwara Ellya and Ratnapura, and mile after mile of tea plantation country, eventually I made it back to Colombo. I passed a few days here happily in sight of the ocean, mostly hanging out in different western style eateries in a nearby mall, a kind of necessary decompression and opportunity to prepare myself for whatever lay ahead. It most definitely had more of a feel of a holiday, with relatively little that felt in any way reminiscent of the transcendental energies that I had last experienced in Mustang. I had applied on-line for a standard 'sticker' visa to India when back in the Adam's Peak area, my birthday gift to myself, rather than try to extend my 30 day tourist allowance in a country where I hadn't really planned on being in the first place. This was in the end as well, as it was to be until the new year in 2023 before India re-instated the e-visa facility to UK citizens.

Another sting in the tail awaited me in departures at the airport, however. I had struggled to fill in the requisite on-line documentation for entry into India, which, despite the demand for negative pcr proofs being dropped by one branch of the immigration process, was still

being required by another, so had had yet again to find a lab to get the test done last minute, an unhappy reminder of the previous year leaving Kathmandu. Worse was to follow. I had checked in on-line and had my virtual boarding pass on my phone, but was stopped as I tried to progress through departures and sent back to the desks to get a hard copy. The guy behind the desk then demanded to see proof of onward travel from India, which of course I didn't have. It has never ever been a requirement (for me anyway) to have such an onward flight as an entry requirement, so I hadn't even considered a possible need to get one. There was a mere twenty minutes left before the desk closed and all I could do was to try and buy some irrelevant flight on my phone in order to comply with the completely unnecessary demand. Once again I was overwhelmed by that awful feeling of unreality and rising panic. With just ten minutes left and being quite unable to get anything, I went back to the desk and said that I was going to miss my flight if they didn't let me through, and why couldn't they just print me out the boarding pass as I had actually checked in and had the virtual copy anyway. The guy shrugged his shoulders, pressed the button on his machine and hey presto, the boarding pass popped out, and I finally made it through to the boarding gate with barely any time left. What price India? How many more rites of passage of such an order was I going to have to endure to test my commitment?!

On the flight to Delhi, as we passed over the distant brown featureless landscape of the vast sub-continent several miles below, I struggled not to worry about Immigration, in case I was indeed required to show proof of an onward flight, as I had been told I would. And, finally joining the long queues to enter, I also realised that I was likely to miss the connection to Dehradun, given the domestic terminal is some way away from the International anyway. It felt like a bleak welcome back to that land of temples and tigers where I had had such sublime experiences two years earlier. The immigration official stamped me through no further questions or documents required and then I had to get to the domestic airport, purchase another flight ticket and re-arrange the car that had been scheduled to meet me at Dehradun, being none other than my trusty friend and guide Sahdev from earlier years.

So to Rishikesh, Tapovan and Greenhills once more, where I was given the same room overlooking the Badrinath road that I had first had back at the beginning of lockdown in 2020. The exhaustion and cumulative stress of the journey then took its toll, and I was badly sick before collapsing into the bed to lay unmoving, listening to the thundering

passing traffic – the cars, buses, and lorries with their multi-tone horns, but fell asleep despite the noise, secure in the knowledge that I was, finally, back in the place I needed to be.

Was it a dream?

That year, and 2023 which followed, were in large part defined by a sense of my groping around trying to re-engage with the energies of 2020, largely unsuccessfully so. For one thing everything had changed with the regression back into pre pandemic days and the deluge of modern urban tourism that now took over. From being the International Yoga capital of the world, focus of the new age wellness industry and the international backpacker crowd, domestic tourism claimed its own. Businesses, which had taken such a loss in 2020 and 2021, began to prosper again. And my old haunt Greenhills, ever memorable as being a kind of home across the 2020 lockdown months, was now host to thousands of visitors from Delhi and all across the north of the country. It was expensive for me on my very limited budget and a cause for concern at staying there for protracted periods, uncertain where else I could go. Nowhere else seemed ‘right’ anyway. The Sixties themed garden restaurant was still in full swing, broadcasting its dated pop music loudly and daily well into the evening and this began to get on my nerves badly as time went by. No amount of Zen practice seemed to help for long.

The Sixties called. They want their icons back[44]

> “During the long period of the Indian lockdown across the summer of 2020, my home became an attractive hotel on the edge of town along the Badrinath Road, called Hotel Sixties Greenhills. Here I might be found many a day sitting in the garden restaurant, reading or contemplating the issues of the day.
>
> And thence I returned just a week ago to continue my sojourn in Rishikesh. It seemed unimaginable to stay anywhere else, so inevitably I would always have come back here. The place hasn’t changed much, still themed around 1960s

[44] See: The Sixties called. They want their icons back

popular music and counter culture, the original inspiration being the much vaunted visit by the Beatles to the ashram of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968, critically raising awareness of Indian culture and religion in the West and lending a catalytic imperative for the subsequent exponential growth of what is now called New Age.

I am not someone who is in any way nostalgic for the music of their youth, so I am probably not the best person to review the 60s restaurant given its focus and the music played throughout day and evening, but it is clearly very popular with many of the people who visit here, possibly of younger generations finding novelty in the fifty year old vintage music scene. I wonder how much the majority of these folk really know about those now long passed days which were seen as something of a Zeitgeist, a time of musical innovation and counter culture rebellion against prevailing post war social norms, with Flower Power, Woodstock, free love, protest songs and experimentation with the then new generation of psychoactive substances made famous by Aldous Huxley's Doors of Perception, and eagerly seized upon by rock groups of the day, both to mediate their own forays into the psychological dark, as well as lend a sense of the exotic to their brand names. Zeitgeist or otherwise, the protest songs, experimentation with new mores and spiritualities seem not to have realised their potential or to have effected any lasting, meaningful change in making the world a better place, but probably this isn't the place to be debating why.

For me, it is strange though to see how the people of that time, ordinary humans as they were, have been worked into a kind of new mythology that idolises them, when many were simply lost. The flirtation with Eastern philosophy and methodologies, morphing into new age beliefs and practices as they did, didn't seem to help them much. Some died young, members of the infamous so-called 27 club, as with Doors' Jim Morrison, some were murdered because of their fame as John Lennon, himself purportedly disillusioned by the mere humanity of the spiritual teachers he had sought guidance from, whilst others succumbed to the effects of their wealth, fame, and unlimited access to rocks' heavy fuels: alcohol and drugs. But possibly I am being cynical!

Music apart, the vibe and, importantly, the cuisine are good here: multicultural and original from Indian to Italian and generally distinct in a town where otherwise many of the cafés and restaurants serve food typical of the region.

In the days following the gradual reopening of life across the summer of 2020, the Beatles café and garden restaurant were largely the haunt of the many Westerners still resident then in the two popular districts of Rishikesh: Laxman Jhula and Tapovan. Memories of life at the restaurant include eclectic cosmopolitan gatherings of French, Brazilians, Russians, Germans, Israelis, Brits, Spaniards and so on. Occasionally there were more unusual events like a wedding celebration between an Australian man and a Spanish girl who had met at an ashram before the lockdown, and, as time passed, decided to formalise their love with a marriage ceremony at a local temple. Later they disappeared back in the direction of Europe and I still wonder how they are doing and how they recall their strange nuptials in such a place, at such a time, in such a way.”

Arriving from Sri Lanka early in April, it was yet too soon to attempt a return to the mountains, so I planned to go to Gangotri with Sahdev mid-May with the advance of spring. The intervening weeks stretched rather interminably past and occasional outings with Sahdev failed to recapture any real sense of the spiritual purpose that had once so fired me. I felt I was treading water, although all around me burned forest fires as the dry winter and spring months had failed to produce rainfall sufficient to keep them at bay.

Rishikesh for addicts[45]

It's 1st May today and this marks my fourth week anniversary of arriving here from Sri Lanka. May Day traditionally marks the first day of summer and throughout the UK Morris and maypole dancers will be celebrating with the time honoured pagan festivals. In York where I have lived for many years, there are always impressive displays of folk dancing and a carnival style atmosphere.

Here in India, inevitably it's different, although festivals still tend to group around cycles of agricultural productivity (sowing, harvesting) and associated lunar phases, as they do everywhere around the world, at least in traditional societies.

Summertime apparently arrived over the Easter weekend two weeks ago, celebrated as a public holiday here and heralding the holiday season, so the weekend trippers now arrive in droves from Delhi and neighbouring states, although exactly what they do to pass the time here is harder to see. The traffic is backed up down on the road, with tour buses and land rovers bearing inflatable rafts on their roofs, saloon cars of every kind, motor scooters and, of course, pedestrians by the thousand. Whenever I go into town, the small street food stalls are always doing a brisk business. I don't know the nightlife scene here in anyway, but assuming there are clubs then I presume they'll be full of ravers partying 'til late. The sounds of other guests at the hotel returning late into the night, slamming doors lends credence to this too.

As I write the air is full of vehicle horns blaring long and loudly, a sound which continues day and night, whenever there is traffic in fact, as folk hereabouts drive on their horns, which I can only suppose expresses a sense of frustration or annoyance, or some primeval 'I'm here; get out of my way' as given everyone is in the same predicament, which is to say caught up in slow moving lines of traffic, then it's hard to see that it serves any useful purpose whatever. It has little effect on the many cattle roaming around the roads either. Born on the streets they couldn't be more sublimely impervious to thundering trucks passing within centimetres of them.

[45] See: Rishikesh for addicts

They stand in the centre of the road and confront vehicles of every size with the same impassivity. I have even seen a small herd (‘the local group’) settling down for the night in the centre of the road just beyond the hotel.

Police sirens and tannoys complement the roar of traffic and blaring of horns; here in the place where the rishis (sages) of old sat in the deep silence of meditation by the Ganges River, or contemplated ancient theological texts about the nature of Ultimate Reality.

Visitors to the town include a spectrum from colourfully and traditionally dressed rural or village folk coming for temple pujas, a now steadily increasing presence of newly arrived western tourists with the gradual reopening of the country following lockdown, the many colourful sadhus and swamis, some with staffs and begging bowls, and the overwhelmingly dominant traffic of visitors from neighbouring states and cities. Certainly it’s an eclectic brew.

Rishikesh is an addiction, or so the colourful graffiti proclaims, and certainly it seems to be so, whatever the reason people of every kind flock here, whether for temple pilgrimages, yoga or thrill seeking of a more extrovert kind.

The ashrams and yoga schools that Rishikesh is traditionally famous for are now open again for business. Construction sites everywhere throughout the town mark the building of more as determination to cash in on the lucrative spiritual industries combines with a kind of deliberate bordering on desperate blind defiance to the newly emergent and menacing order of global reality with its dangerous acceleration of armed conflicts, its shifting, self-serving and disingenuous strategic allegiances and the inexorable advance of global warming as the backdrop to it all. This season has seen some of the most severe fires in the region as the rainless conditions and high winds consume precious hectarage of forests and attendant wildlife here. And the annual rains aren’t expected for another month. Who was it who fiddled while Rome burned?”[46]

[46] https://images.app.goo.gl/qxMbEoVZvz4kqsx87. Image is from 2021, although the fires this spring are as bad.

Life (and near death) in the eyrie

Across April into May I arranged to stay in the small top floor apartment in Greenhills, a steep effortful climb up several flights of steps, but affording fine panoramic views across the surrounding hills, sadly and alarmingly mostly burning in the dry hot conditions then. Watching the flames creeping closer, setting light to swathe after swathe of the forest, was far from being a soothing or inspirational sight.

The days passed uneventfully, making sorties down into the chaotic streets full of tourists, to the Divine Bakery café or shopping for food, as helpfully I did now have a small kitchen and could prepare my own meals, than having to depend upon the garden restaurant and cost of meals there. It was getting much hotter now, so there was less inclination to go out anyway, but more to stay inside with the A/C on. I was pondering the plan of developing my website and overall journey experiences into some kind of more formal practice that I might offer to other neophyte spiritual seekers and had started contacting some of the local Facebook groups. Sitting quietly thus occupied one afternoon at the coffee table by the window, door to the outside balcony wide open given the heat of day, a large male rhesus macaque monkey suddenly walked in and, seeing me, took up a defensive position the other side of the table, teeth with long sharp canine fangs bared. I was well enough aware of the danger of ambulant monkeys on these buildings and knew the protocol of never leaving your room open unguarded because of the risk returning to find it trashed, but for some reason, the danger of actually being in the room with the door open had escaped me. Monkeys will commonly check out open doors, but will generally avoid entering a room that's occupied. The rhesus macaques in particular are to be wary of, as temperamentally they are far more aggressive and destructive than their larger more peaceful primate relatives, the black faced langurs, a large troupe of which regularly passed by from time to time. I had no fear of these and loved to see them, but it was quite different with the macaques. They have no fear of people and simply see you as a resource to be exploited where possible.

A surge of adrenalin channelling my fear and defensive reactions manifested with me adopting my own aggressive posture and trying to scare the monkey away making loud growling noises in a kind of improbable Mexican stand off as to which one of us could

appear more frightening to the other. Looking back on it (as I did many times afterwards) I was shocked that I ever tried to scare it away at all, exposing myself to a strong likelihood of direct and almost certainly lethal attack. The monkey simply backed off further into my room and climbing onto my bed, sat on the pillow, continuing to snarl at me with its frightful curved canine teeth well in view. I would rather have confronted an aggressive dog. You stand some chance of sweet talking a dog, but no chance whatever of sweet talking a monkey. Then I remembered the long handled squeegee mop in the bathroom just behind me and getting it, brandished it at my primate visitor who finally acknowledged I held the upper hand and I chased it back out of the room. I collapsed back into my chair having secured the door firmly behind it and waited for my heart rate and breathing to subside into something approaching normal. Thereafter I always sat with a complex construct of obstacles in front of the door if open and the squeegee mop close to hand. This was the second memorable incident (together with the departure from Kathmandu in November 2021 the previous year) that marked my stay and I have many times remembered it as being something off a miracle and a sign of how protected I was that I survived serious injury unscathed.

Return to Gangotri

I had arranged with Sahdev to travel to Gangotri on 14th May, but it was to be a very different experience from the first in 2020 when there had been few other travellers on the roads, and largely characterised by long traffic queues and jams along the narrow curving mountain roads. We were lucky inasmuch as we were only delayed once by an hour as the manual traffic gate system of controlling the flow of vehicles stopped us, when others heading into the region were delayed by many hours. Mandatory registration and pre journey approval by the regional authorities were needed given the sheer numbers attempting to enter the region, and there were no guarantees of finding hotel accommodation anywhere either given the sheer level of demand was encouraging hotel owners to cancel prior reservations and accept the highest price from passing traffic. I told Sahdev not to worry, I was sure we'd be given whatever we needed. We mostly passed the manual traffic gate system and arriving finally into Dharali where we were to stay ahead of Gangotri, the hotel owner known to Sahdev and where we had stayed the first trip had indeed reserved a room for me. Sahdev always determinedly made his own arrangements for sleeping, although it concerned me that he would on occasion sleep in

the car, and would never have countenanced our sharing a room just for convenience. It was a part of his strict ethic and concept of what was appropriate.

Whatever magic I recalled from my first visit had dissipated in the extraordinary frenetic fairground frenzy of too many people determinedly descending upon a destination itself never designed for such numbers or for people simply out for a good time. Stories emerged of city folk used to comfortable living dying of heart attacks as they bathed in the icy waters of the Ganges head stream. Six people at least met such an end the weekend we were there. The river beach where I had once seen the heart within a heart inscribed in the sand was at least and strangely quiet from the noise and bustle up on the road, where the traditional pilgrims came from time to time. It felt like a little haven amidst the chaos. I arranged to do a small private puja at the Kalp Kedar temple the following morning, taking some fruit and incense sticks as offerings.

Otherwise the main temple at Gangotri remained unvisited this trip given the queues of cars several kilometres long and no parking facilities. Instead we headed to the smaller Maha Ganga, Mukhba temple where the statue of the deity still was in residence for the winter anyway, not having yet made its ceremonial trip back to its summer home. It was beautiful weather, still springtime and a cuckoo was calling from the apple orchards high up on the hillsides, although it was well past the blossom season by then. I would have to wait until 2024 before I actually experienced the blossoms in bloom.

Chota Char Dham. Pilgrimage in the days of mass tourism[47]

> “Sahdev Rana, my trusty driver and guide and I left early Friday morning to drive to Gangotri, source of the Ganges and one of the famous Chota Char Dham Pilgrimage destinations sacred to Hindus. We had been here before, back in October 2020 when the restrictions imposed at the pandemic were first eased and inter-regional travel became possible again.
>
> My intention on returning here had to do with re visiting a place that had been key in the mature period of my pilgrimage – the ending of the summer long lockdown in

[47] See: Chota Char Dham. Pilgrimage in the days of mass tourism

Rishikesh – and the entire 2019-2020 year, which had started when I left my home town of York and arrived into Delhi in November 2019. It represented a kind of closure to this whole sacred, if challenging, journey and an important line drawn under it.

The journey always takes some eight hours from Rishikesh and given the sheer quantity of vehicles on the road as you climbed higher into the mountains, could easily have taken a lot longer. Just about everyone seems to have made Chota Char Dham their holiday destination now, with thousands of tourist buses and coaches, jeeps and saloon cars bearing a motley assortment of mainly city folk, most totally unused to the privations of these journeys and the impact of high altitude. The newly introduced gate (manual traffic light) system stalled dozens of vehicles at the road side to allow the opposing direction to pass. We were lucky and were caught up only once, whereas others were delayed by many hours. The hospitality sector in the region had effectively collapsed under the pressure of the sheer number of travellers, and many people were lucky to get bed and board anywhere, sometimes reduced to sleeping in buses and cars.

I had planned a small puja the morning following our arrival at the ancient Kalp Kedar Shiva temple close to the Ganges at the village of Thais Dharali where we were staying. Given its architectural style, the temple seems to be about the same age as the two Shiva temples at Kedarnath, i.e. some seven hundred years old. Then, a long period of quiet contemplation on the banks of the Ganges[iii] a perfect place for meditation. Despite being so close to the road and the village crowded with tourists and pilgrims, there was no one around to spoil the peace, and was quite deserted. Walking back to the hotel afterwards, I saw that the apple I had left as part of my offering on the temple altar (Shivalinga) had disappeared, and then saw that the small group of sadhus who were staying in simple quarters close by, had divided it between them. This is part of that tradition where eating the temple offering is seen as being sanctifying. It made me happy to see this, and later on I noticed the orange I had left had similarly gone.

It helped that I had never planned to go to the main temple in Gangotri itself, as Sahdev said there would be queues going back kilometres as there are no parking

facilities there. However, and serendipitously, we eventually made it to the Maha Ganga Mukhba Temple on the far side of the river, where the statue of the deity spends the winter when the main temple is under snow. This was very lucky as it's reached by a bridge and a little narrow road that passes through a big army encampment down by the river and the army control access to whomever tries to pass and exclude anyone who looks like they may be just tourists. Something about us and the way we looked clearly went in our favour that day.

The village is ancient with beautiful old timber houses and the temple itself. It's such a delightful, peaceful location, half way up the mountain surrounded by peach and pear trees (and lots of wild cannabis). There was even a springtime cuckoo calling.

I had not planned on doing anything more adventurous, and given the state of congestion on the roads, it was clearly unwise to attempt much more anyway. But at least I was able to revisit some of the places that had so inspired me on my first visit back in 2020, when I had been vouchsafed such sublime mystical experiences here. Hence my having a particularly special feeling about this region.

The prevailing memory aside from my own private experiences is how modern tourism is in the process of destroying the places that it seeks out. Sahdev confirmed that he had never seen it so bad in all his driving career and was clearly very shocked. It was sad to see the impact on the authentic pilgrims who ply these routes for much of their lives, now having to negotiate immense queues of buses, cars and people who overwhelm these sacred places with very little interest in doing more than taking selfies to prove they've been there.

So we left at dawn on Sunday morning for the long drive back to Rishikesh. Already there were dozens of buses on the road making our return journey hazardous. Meeting a line of these around a blind bend on a narrow mountain road at high speed tests the patience and skill of even experienced drivers. However, we made it back eventually and safely to get caught up again in the queues approaching Rishikesh, with a distance of some three kilometres taking an hour and a half to cover.

The contrast between the timeless traditions of pilgrimage in this region plied by the many pilgrims and sadhus who still patiently walk these immense distances at high altitude, often in the cold and with little to eat, and modern city folk with their bucket list of the four Chota Char Dham Pilgrimage destinations to be covered in a ten day tour could not be starker".[iv]

Leaving Rishikesh

The end was clearly in sight as it became harder to rationalise staying there longer after a clear sign from the Universe that setting myself up as some alternative spiritual advisor and guide was not, in fact, going to be part of my calling. And there really didn't seem much else left for me to do.

Leaving Rishikesh[48]

"It's time to leave Rishikesh. For these last few weeks I have realised that the work I came here to do, in whatever capacity, is done. I have documented life here since my arrival at the beginning of April, and my sorrow at the inevitable progression of the global tourism culture in its diverse expressions from thrill seeking to spiritual adventuring. Ashrams fall only to have newer and bigger ones built in their place. Guest houses spring up in every free plot of land where once there were gardens where people grew flowers and vegetables and birds sang in the trees. The roads are one endless line of traffic bearing some visitors out and new visitors in. I see newly arrived western looking tourists wandering around looking, for the most part, bemused at the scene. For those returning after the pandemic shut down travel and evicted them from India, it must seem such a far cry from the Rishikesh they left, with its yoga schools and ashrams, its yogi and hippy communities. India has reclaimed its own, if only temporarily. I don't necessarily regret this, as the modern yoga culture itself is, in part at least, largely an extension of the whole 'wellness' industry, heavily influenced by western (principally US) cultural drivers. But it does sadden me to see that the shallow, all consuming, materialistic secular global

[48] See: Leaving Rishikesh

culture has so successfully overwritten the modern Indian soul, and a land that once almost palpably vibrated with an indescribable spiritual energy is now instead vibrating constantly to the sounds of thundering traffic, pneumatic construction machinery and people hell bent on having a good time.

Why single out Rishikesh for criticism when this is all simply part of the newly emergent global order and something you find everywhere in the world? Because it markets itself on its spirituality, laying a sort of privileged claim to some unique character. It hosts the International Yoga Conference every March, attracting the great and the good: principally high profile gurus of international reputation and the huge followings they attract. In a town where the teachings of the great spiritual masters of India and saints of old are still used as lures for seekers of enlightenment, I feel that Rishikesh has sold its soul. It has been taken over by the wealth making machinery of globalisation and become a sort of Disney World for the newly affluent city dwellers and the motley assortment of New Age and Wellness groupies from western cultures.

My original aim in returning here was to offer informal spiritual guidance and advice to the many genuine seekers of enlightenment who might be confused about the many different and often contradictory eastern theologies, spiritual traditions and schools and not exactly sure what they were looking for, or how to go about looking even, in a place where there are at least a hundred ashrams and no clear way of evaluating the quality of any of them. This website represented a response to seeing this from the days I spent here across the summer of 2020. But now I feel that somehow all this is oddly superfluous. A comment from someone on one of the Rishikesh yogi community groups on Facebook said that a spiritual elder had once told them that the quality of a seeker’s sincerity would be mirrored by the teacher they attract, in other words, actively seeking to guide or advise might be redundant anyway. Thinking this through I found myself in agreement, at least to some extent. And I feel that probably most people are actually getting what they are really looking for here anyway: entertainment, not enlightenment at all. Who am I then to tell them otherwise? We all have the power of choice if we have a clear idea of what we want, why, whether it’s actually good for us in the first place and how to go about finding it.

So how will I remember this town then? I will remember it for its fleeting one time peace and serenity, when everywhere closed during the early weeks of lockdown and the river was quite deserted. I will remember the monkey invasions, the cattle (and their by products) everywhere, the surrounding green forested hillsides echoing to the call of peacocks at dawn, improbable juxtapositions of urban and wild. I'll remember the sounds of the nearby temple on the hill playing drums and cymbals every morning and evening; latterly we have the chanting of mantras throughout the day, most every day, but at least this feels authentic. I'll remember the clip clop of hooves along the road and the jingling of bells announcing the passing of another mule train.

I recall the ordinary village folk going about their lives in the town in the way they might have before global culture claimed it. I recall from my first days here, the many colourfully dressed traditional people from the outlying regions and further afield near the Tibetan border, coming to make their pujas in the different temples here. To them Rishikesh was still a sacred pilgrimage destination of ancient repute. Then the many sadhus, some covered in fine white ash, in white or orange loin cloths and long ropes of matted dreadlocks piled high upon their heads, wrapped up in colourful cloth, their foreheads with the characteristic three white horizontal lines denoting devotees of Lord Shiva. The swamis, some leaders of the different yoga schools and ashrams zooming around on motor scooters as the modern world has clearly upgraded their operating systems. In short, an eclectic mix of all sorts of people from western New Age hippies, yoga devotees, pilgrims, tourists both domestic and foreign, and even once a monkey man on Laxman Jhula bridge, shortly before the lockdown closed it to traffic.

Shiva, Mahadev (Almighty God) as he is known, the focus of worship at many of the temples hereabouts, now fronts many a small business enterprise, from catering to real estate.

As you walk up behind the main district of Tapovan, along the small streets that lead up into the hills, the yoga schools and ashrams still dominate, mixed in with residential dwellings and small retail outlets. You come across areas where favelas

still house the urban poor in conditions far removed from the smart hotels and ashrams this area is now better known for.

Sadly I must say that what I will largely recall of life here is the endless surround sound of ongoing construction, all day every day. It was what struck me when I first ever came here back in 2019. That, and now, the endless noise of traffic down in the street with blaring horns day and night.

But concealed in these sorry truths is nevertheless a striking irony. For all its failings, it is nevertheless still the context for all that critical 'deep' work which, in the end, delivered my own enlightenment, in providing an important tension or counterpoint that encouraged to me challenge many of my views, attitudes and conditionings, as well as study the different eastern theologies more fully. No thanks to yoga schools, ashrams, international conferences or satsangs by famous gurus. In many ways it was like holding a perpetual satsang with my deeper self anyway, although some of the key and sublime moments of revelation were actually experienced in places like Gangotri, Kedarnath and, strangely, even in York. I have described it thus:

"I knew then what the experience of moksha – liberation – felt like, or rather recognised it as a place; a place that, importantly, as I understood later, is also itself the Self. This, of course, is that desert place spoken of by Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī. So perhaps I was drawn here for this purpose after all.[v]

On my final day in the eyrie, having already booked my flight, I had, unsought, another spontaneous revelatory experience. I can still recall the exact place in the room as I was crossing it, when I felt as though something unseen touched me and in so doing, I clearly saw myself in everything that was. It was fleeting but profound; best described as though you were looking at a lake with all its myriad ripples reflecting myriad images, all different, but momentarily the surface stills and you see that what you are looking at is simply a reflection of yourself. The famous Recognition Sutras from the medieval Shiva tantra traditions in Kashmir best describe this[49]. It is something that assiduous spiritual practice,

[49] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pratyabhijnahridayam

meditation and contemplation is supposed to give, representing the apogee of the spiritual pathway. I experienced it fleetingly, unsought, but it was in many ways similar to the visions I had had during the first visit to Gangotri, where I saw everything as a one of something, whole and myself as part of that. I departed for Kochi in Kerala, ever for me a kind of portal to enter or leave India, being the most un-Indian of states (to me) and a place to prepare or decompress, to conclude the final stage of my stay in India for that year.

My small homely guest house in Princess Street, Fort Cochin had kindly offered me the chance to stay and cook my own meals in their family kitchen, when in fact they had been closed to visitors over the pandemic. I had my usual simple room with small patio overlooking the courtyard garden with its fish pond, where I had had my first most profound experience of being the Self in the new year of 2020, when the pandemic clouds were still in the process of gathering on the horizons.

But it was a struggle to determine what I should do now and how to understand the various insights I had had. As a solitary traveller on the path of enlightenment this is certainly one of the hardest challenges. Within the formalised context of an established spiritual discipline with a guru as personal guide, then I imagine you would rarely have this sort of dilemma, as there would ever be the interpretation and guidance of your ‘guide’ to follow. My guide was (still is) the higher Self. But it is commonplace to have times when you feel bereft of any guidance or a calling. In such times it is better to stay quiet and open and wait for the deeper wellsprings of insight to manifest, as they are not on tap to be switched on and off at will.

Some sort of decision had to be made though. Arriving into Kochi towards the end of May, I stayed a further month across June, now cooler in Kerala with the onset of the annual rains than the furnace of the north. In time it seemed that the work I had originally been involved with at the University, concluded with my writing the final report of that project before leaving for my Pilgrimage in 2019, began to beckon once more. It could most certainly be more justified now, set within a framework of being recalled to finish something that had been left in some ways ‘undone’. I contacted my erstwhile project lead and we discussed ways forward.

Works still to do[50]

‘Early in the day it was whispered that we should sail in a boat, only thou and I and never a soul in the world would know of this our pilgrimage to no country and to no end. In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words.

Is the time not come yet? Are there works still to do? Lo, the evening has come down upon the shore and in the fading light the seabirds come flying to their nests. Who knows when the chains will be off, and the boat, like the last glimmer of sunset, vanish into the night?[vi]

“When I started out on my Pilgrimage, I had no idea how (even if) it would end. To have planned an end would have completely negated the concept of such a journey, when you commit yourself completely to the unknown with all that means. At times I wondered, certainly felt, that I had or should become some sort of Sadhu myself, and be plying the sacred routes to different temples for the rest of my days. Clearly however, that wasn’t to be.

Having given up everything that had constituted my life when I left York in November 2019, including all pretensions to further formal University work, it took me by surprise therefore to find, as I contemplated returning to the world again, that the work I had engaged upon until I left was apparently still there, waiting for me as it were.

In the East the path of renunciation is generally a lifelong one. Sadhus, the wandering monks, never return again to the world they have left. When their wandering capacities have come to an end, they generally settle in some sacred location such a Varanasi (or even Rishikesh) and wait for that ultimate journey of transformation – death – to meet them. In Western Mystic traditions, the final goal of the mystic’s journey is union with Divinity, called, in fact, the Unitive Life, after which

[50] See: Works still to do

they most definitely return to the world with a life's mission of some order or another, but one that serves the world with sacred work. By this I don't necessarily mean conventional 'good works' or works that center upon religious or theological activities even, but something that helps to make the world a better place. In the Jungian and Post Jungian schools of Analytical Psychology, the true goal of the life journey, called Individuation, also presupposes that those who undertake it return to the world and society with healing gifts from their encounters with their personal and the collective Unconscious, encounters made in the strange worlds and experiences that their journey exposed them to.

So, as I embark, strangely, upon this next stage back into the world I left, it seems that University work revolving around the subjects I had most recently been engaged upon will likely be those I look to again."

Changes

Returning from India in the summer of 2022, staying with family until a more independent accommodation arrangement could be found, impressed it upon me that 'going back', however apparently justified at the time, came with its own peculiar challenges. I found Jesus' cautionary words: "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" periodically haunted me[51]. Was this what I was doing? As ever, it seemed down to a problem of reading the signs; of 'interpretation'. Was I indeed being called back to finish unfinished work, or was I simply succumbing to old instincts that hadn't been adequately extinguished by the pilgrimage?

It was uncomfortably clear from early on that the person who had left and the person who returned were already very different though. Sitting in the cold lofty halls of the University department's libraries, trying to re-engage with the kinds of literature that it had once been my lot to read in earlier times, felt completely irrelevant to my needs or interests, as fundamentally changed as they now were. It had no real power to engage me. I was able to muster just enough commitment to work with the original end of project report and revise an earlier book proposal for it to be published through one of the major academic

[51] New testament Luke 62.

publishers, which was, happily, accepted at this second attempt. This, however, only committed me to whatever further work would be needed to produce a finished manuscript for publication, a very different order of work to a ‘mere’ report. I also toyed with ideas of taking the work forward into an ‘implementation stage’, which would similarly commit me to working with the original collaborators again. I felt completely torn in two.

From time to time I discussed my ambivalent feelings with my erstwhile project PI and lead, who did his best to be understanding and sympathetic, but I could tell likely didn’t really get what I was trying to explain and there was really very little he could say or do anyway, given I had been the one to suggest that I came back and resume my old portfolio of interests. He had hardly pressured me in any way. Back in the world of ‘ordinary reality’ I encountered the entirely understandable puzzlement or mainly disinterest from the majority of folk I needed to engage with. People knew I had been away for a chunk of time across the pandemic, and simply saw me as ‘coming back’ and they weren’t exactly unwelcoming in any way. At the beginning I played to this, believing in some ways that I was ‘coming back’ and that in time I would settle better back into my earlier academic dynamics and relationships, but this was a theatre that couldn’t be sustained for long.

Endeavouring to explain the purpose of what I had done – giving away everything that had constituted my life and throwing myself into the unknown with nearly nothing to sustain me, was exactly the opposite from what the world and majority of people living in it understand as being desirable, certainly ‘normal’. Endeavouring to add further weight to this by saying that it was only what Jesus had told people to do anyway, simply warned people that I was likely mentally ill, or unstable in some way and better humoured or just given a wide berth; I am not, in fact, a Christian anyway, as explained elsewhere here.

It was also when I first noticed a strange phenomenon working within me, which itself betrayed the immense change at depth that the Pilgrimage had evidently wrought. This manifested in that I could experience brief surges of enthusiasm about something, enjoy some occasion or undertaking, or flirt with the idea of taking something up, only to find it wither and die, as though with a seed taking root in too shallow soil. I never had any lasting feeling of engagement or commitment with anything (outside of my journey and what that had been) and couldn't identify with anything that manifested as 'ambition' any more. I had no real interest in things for their own sake, no desire to be home making any more and no interest in travelling to anywhere other than what had now become my only goal – India, and that a relatively small geographical region of it being the mountains and foothills of the north. Coming back in this way, as resistant as I had originally been to the idea anyway, showed me that I had, in fact, actually achieved the one life goal I had always wanted to do – the life journey or 'Pilgrimage'- and all that that had meant. Possibly I had never been aware across my life that this *was* the only real goal of my life until, having achieved it, I never ever felt the same drive or interest in doing anything else. It was as though it had touched some deep place within me and changed the chemistry there, in the way that an egg, when fertilised, changes its chemistry becoming something subtly but profoundly different. The Pilgrimage had also apparently completely re-laid my personal foundations, severing the me that had undertaken it from the me that first went into it. As I have since understood it, it was in a strange way as though I had been severed from my past which no longer had any claim on me, and that my karma had, as a consequence been expunged. The learning of this and all that it meant was not, however, to be easily achieved.

With the turning of the new year I abandoned attempts at re-integrating myself back in the world and decided to return to India once again, to try to find whatever was lacking in my life back there again, a repetitive seesawing dynamic that characterised these post pilgrimage lost feeling years.

Pilgrim's Return[52]

"In my final post of this travel blog 'Works Still to Do', I was preparing myself to return to the UK to resume university project work, the work I had been engaged upon for much of the latter period of my life until leaving to commence my Pilgrimage in November 2019. It had never been my expectation to return, so it took me by surprise that all the cues in my life were coalescing towards this, but I nevertheless believed I should be open to whatever course was given.
As I write I have been back in India a full month, having spent some eight months back in the UK. Whatever works were still left to do that had called me back, appear to have been done during that time and therefore here I am again, once again contemplating an open space in my life and being open to whatever the calling might be in how to proceed.

But, if I am honest, it seems clear to me that at least part of the underlying purpose in being called to return to the UK was to show me how the intervening Pilgrimage had totally changed me, in a manner that meant I would never be able to return. It was as though I had been immersed in a sort of spiritual nuclear reactor which had completely changed the configuration of my nature. So many of the old academic intellectual skills, and life 'drivers' had been transmuted into the higher goal and were simply no longer available. I was able to recover enough to achieve a few useful results, but had to confront the truth that, in fact, I was simply no longer able to undertake the work I had done across much of my life. The capacity was no longer there. The old adage that you can never ever 'go back' loomed awkwardly large before me.

Of course now I have 'come back' here to India. Not to resume the Pilgrimage, which I formally concluded with the 'rites of termination' at the Ganges at Dharali, Gangotri back in May 2022, but because this place seems to be a crucible for change; or certainly my crucible for change. So here I await, once again in

[52] See: Pilgrim's Return

Rishikesh, for those deeper inner imperatives to set me upon whatever next course is awaiting in this strange exalted journey “to no country and to no end”[vii].

Shortly after arriving into India and Rishikesh on the last day of February, Sahdev and I made another journey back up to Dharali and Gangotri. It was still bitterly cold at that early time of year, but destitute of most of the traffic that had overwhelmed it the previous year so we were able to drive right up to the nearly deserted temple precincts. Very few hotels were open and the basic infrastructure still needed repairing after the winter snows. The long narrow street leading to the main temple was effectively abandoned, the many guest houses and eateries shuttered and closed; frozen snow still blocking the way in places. The few people there seemed to be off duty army personnel from the several army bases in the region, given its proximity to the border with China. Otherwise there was just the occasional visitor, like ourselves. Young diehards braved the icy waters to bathe in the river, newly emerged from the glacier a few kilometres further north.

Although officially closed, the resident priest kindly opened the temple so we were able to pay our respects to it. Then we made the drive back along the high, winding mountain roads, through the spruce forests opening up to occasional stunning views of the snowy mountains beyond. We returned again to the Maha Ganga, Mukhba Temple, on the opposite bank of the river, where the statue of the deity spends winter, and indeed it was still resident there. No cuckoos this time, it was too early, although there were wild cherry and thorn bushes in blossom, heralding early spring.

Later that afternoon as the fleeting warmth of the day passed and the chill of the evening and the season descended, we returned to Dharali where we were, as usual, staying and location of the ancient Kalp Kedar temple. There, desiring a change, I managed to persuade the cook at a small street side eatery to make British style egg and chips, washed down with several small cups of hot sweet chai to keep the cold at bay. A few village people hung around in the little square, some ambulant cattle and several Himalayan mountain dogs. And so followed another freezing night huddled under heavy blankets trying to keep warm, before an early start the following morning to make the long return journey back to Rishikesh.

This year was more than ever characterised by an awful ennui and inability to find anywhere I felt was appropriate to settle. I had lodged once again at Greenhills from where I arranged to go back to the holy man's temple near Sahdev's village on my birthday to make a private birthday puja near the end of March. This was a delightful day; the baba himself always has a very special energy and sense of light flowing from him, and my little private puja made at the temple above his humble cave-like dwelling was accompanied by Sahdev chanting the ritual mantras. I felt I had done the day and the occasion justice. After then, however, I had no idea what to do. I needed to move on from Greenhills given the cost of staying there long term, but wherever I went came with its own problems.

Was it all a Dream?[53]

"After writing 'Return to the Source', last in the series of posts for the website In the Spirit, a long empty impasse opened into my life, which I struggled to make sense of. After a fleeting return of a sense of the numinous around my return to Gangotri mid-March, the following weeks panned out slowly, increasingly leached of any of the magical feelings that had so sustained me the previous years. Wherever I went, the harsh uncompromising reality of modern India, devoid of any sense of the numinous, beat noisily upon my shores. I left Rishikesh and went to Goa for six weeks, a real frying pan to fire experience, given the heat of the season. The relentless overwhelming tourism of the north was replaced by charmless beach culture, the entire coast, beautiful enough on its own terms, taken over by a combination of sunseekers from disparate global locations and new age wellness groupies. I had determined to sweat it out (literally) by doing without air conditioning to try and save money, condemning myself to nights drenched in heat and mosquitos, the overhead ceiling fans beating futilely at the air like relentless helicopters. Superheated air descended blanket like during frequent power cuts.

The days and weeks extended interminably. Returning eventually to Rishikesh, an abortive attempt to relocate in Upper Tapovan away from the noise and crowds of the Badrinath Road backfired as the location proved to be an epicentre of the new age wellness yoga scene, together with several guest house dogs that roamed the

[53] See: Was it all a Dream?

premises at night barking long and loudly, ensuring sleepless nights and stressful days.

Hotel Greenhills had ever seemed a kind of proxy home for me since the long months of lockdown in 2020 and I had ever returned there. Now however it had become a lot more expensive and overrun with the urban tourism emanating from Delhi and surrounding provinces. There seemed nowhere else to go, and my trusted guide and driver Sahdev assured me that everywhere in the north and the mountain locations were similarly overrun and destitute of the peace I longed for. Two polarities struggled awkwardly: to force the issue and stay and try to perpetuate a sense of my spiritual journey, or to accept 'reality' (defeat in fact) and return to the UK as I had done almost exactly the same time a year ago. With no new insights or personal strengths to call on, probably inevitably it proved impossible to keep the dream alive and so, with a heavy heart, I made plans to return".

Once again staying with family, the same stark choices re-presented: looking for accommodation and revising my ever notional concept of budget to fit the bleak realities of life back in the UK, where accommodation of any kind had become progressively less affordable. I was finally able to find a small house up in the north east of the country where rental prices were still moderate, and there I went in September, exhausted and bereft of anything that manifested as spiritual insight. I had just enough energy to set up a minimal operation that passed for a home, not expecting to move therefrom ever again. I felt wounded by the experiences of the previous two years' efforts to find my spiritual true north again and these miserable returns to a country I never saw as home in any way, but felt I could nevertheless never be fully free from either. I hung a large print of Shiva Nataraja on the living room wall, and photos of highlights from the 2020 temple visits, and it seemed that that indeed was that.

The demands of preparing the report manuscript for publication as a book still lurked unresolved in my life, and I listlessly endeavoured to apply myself to what was required, unconvincingly so. Eventually my erstwhile project lead and PI, now scheduled as a co-author, thankfully took over and I was able to redirect my energies back into where they needed to be, to recover and regain some sense of life purpose again which I had totally

lost. I took to writing down whatever ideas or insights came to mind – sometimes in the depths of the night – on stickers and papered the kitchen wall with them. I also took up crocheting – a creative meditative practice which itself seemed to encourage the deeper unconscious and cognitive processes to flow.

Four long months thus grounded in the small one time mining and coking boom town gone bust I had settled in duly passed, and with the coming of the New Year, I started going to the nearby historical city and a café there to work on developing my thoughts further. The cumulative weight I had amassed across this time of deep introspection and physical inactivity I finally felt able to address with a new daily two mile walk routine, and a diet. After a morning writing at the café, I would sit with a small sandwich up in the castle and cathedral grounds whatever the weather, and muse over the times when the people who once lived there across many centuries had only ever known the Christian expression of the ineffable Sacred, which I had embraced in its Hindu form.

I could feel the long impasse lifting and new creative energies and with them, a better sense of purpose, starting to flow once more. I felt I had built, or otherwise reinforced foundations upon which new growth could be made. And, after feeling I would never see India again, having burned out on that experience of the land when I left back in the summer, I realised that most certainly I could, and indeed should, return there in the spring, with the confidence that I could now sustain the challenges of that strangest of countries, with its awkward juxtaposition of the sublimely spiritual, and the stridently material.

Part Four

The Final Chapter

The Final Chapter

You are always living the final chapter until some life stage in progress comes to an end and can join those already on the shelf, so the real final chapter may never be one you actually write, or at least finish yourself at all. How to tell though, when such a life stage really has come to an end?

A Tale of Two Bridges. Making the Transition[54]

> “Bridges are so symbolic, all about connecting two sides of a divide, and the process of transition from one to the other. When I started this website I was still back in winter Britain, living in a small market town in County Durham. I would go twice a week into the historical city of Durham, and, having found a café to my liking, I began to develop what would be the signature website for this new stage of Pilgrimage. I wanted it to be ready to pick up the narrative themes when I was ready to write in India.
>
> The view from the café looked out over the medieval footbridge across the River Wear, with the castle and cathedral looming darkly over the town. When I first came here, a busker played folk music on an electric mandolin – Scarborough Fair – that very evocative poignant English folk song popularised by Simon and Garfunkel, that set the tone for the weeks that panned out from then, mostly cold and bleak as January and February wore slowly by. Subsequently the bridge was more often taken over by ranting evangelists preaching God, Jesus and the Bible to the crowds of deaf uninterested passersby. It felt sad to see them, in that they clearly had no insight into how the whole numinous and associated narrative energy had long moved on, leaving them proclaiming a faith in long redundant language that no-one

[54] See: A Tale of Two Bridges. Making the Transition

wanted to hear. And I sometimes thought about what it might take to catch people's attention because I certainly think that the majority of folk are lost and seeking something in their lives, to lift them out of slavish dependency on the arid material and secular world they are embedded in, and give them some confidence in a different, more transcendent vision.

Here in the Durham café I conceived the new website and an Instagram account to complement it for the journey itself and the temple visits that I planned to be making again, in the way I had during the first. I had no prior experience whatever of Instagram and a poor enough opinion of it, so it felt odd to be forcing myself to engage with a world that functioned so exclusively on self promotion, which is not ever a quality I would associate with the dynamics of spiritual journeying and the seeking of enlightenment, being pretty much focussed upon narrow notions of egoic identity in the secular world. And I had no idea how to go about capturing the generality of peoples' interest in the strange dynamics that, to an outside observer, could too readily present as random wanderings and temple tourism that had marked the first Pilgrimage stage from 2019 through to 2022.

I have now been back here three weeks, and look out over such a vastly different scene, of the famous Ram Jhula bridge over the Ganges. The cold bleak winter leading up to Christmas and early spring days of the north of England have now long evaporated, to seem as though they really were more a dream, although well do I remember my frustration at how slowly time seemed to move then, and what twelve remaining weeks to the departure date felt like.

With three difficult transitional weeks behind me now, inevitably confronting the sorts of issues that had all played an important part in my demise the previous year, I now face the yawning open space of the rest of my time here, and whatever that will prove to be. It is my plan to go shortly up into the mountains to the region I have long associated with the sublimest experiences of the first Pilgrimage: Thais Dharali, some 25 kilometres outside of Gangotri itself, where the Bhagirathi River, one of two headstreams of the Ganges, is accessible by foot, when mostly it flows through deep cut gorges. There you find the ancient sunken temple of Kalp Kedar, same age as Kedarnath, some 700 years old, where I have carried out private pujas, including what I termed the 'rite of termination' to formally end the 2019-2022 Pilgrimage cycle. Inevitably it carries such special memories and seems to me to be

the best place to start this new Pilgrimage stage, phoenix style, where the first ended.”

As ever, I started my stay once more at Greenhills Hotel, as a first stop to rest from the long flight and drive up from Delhi International airport, and to adjust to being in the country again. The rooms were noticeably getting a little shabbier with every passing year, although the prices had kept up with the times and changes and increases in the numbers of more affluent tourists emanating from Delhi and the north, therefore progressively less affordable for people on fixed incomes like me. Yet it ever seemed a necessary first step to connect (or try to) with those energies from 2020 when I had stayed there across eight long months, and from whence I had made my journeys to the high altitude temples on the Chota Char Dham Yatra in the high Himalayas.

Year after year I had somehow hoped to find myself back in the Tapovan of Lockdown – quiet, little traffic, the purview of the local townsfolk, ashram devotees and their swamis, sadhus of every order, and, of course, the many ambulant street cattle, but it was doomed never to be. The hordes of thrill seeking adventure-minded tourists crowded the little dusty streets together with dense lines of traffic queuing up and down the Badrinath Road and land rovers bearing the mandatory inflatable rafts for the river.

Rishikesh for Ravers[55]

“It is hard to exaggerate the contrast between the town as it was in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown and the town as it is now. I recall waking one morning and hearing nothing but the wind and the birds. It amazed me that there were so many birds, but of course they had always been there, just drowned out by the all consuming roar of passing traffic. I took a walk early one morning down to the banks of the river known as ‘the beach’, once the focus of the rafting ventures that have come to dominate life on the Ganges now. All was deserted; no people, no rafts, just a couple of itinerant dogs, a distant figure far up the bank, the wind and the birds and sunlight glittering on the river water. It was so beautiful! I imagined it must have been as it was some hundred years ago before the thrill seekers had taken it over.

From my room at the Greenhills hotel I could look down the road and see just the ambulant cattle wandering around, and occasionally two police officers with long canes patrolling the streets on motorbike. During part of the day people were allowed out for essential shopping, and, if discreet, could walk to the river or elsewhere and enjoy the peace and space and views of the surrounding forested hills, the sounds of the peacocks calling in the distance. As the summer slowly passed and more freedom of movement allowed, more people, more traffic and renewed construction activity resumed. Then came the day at the end of September when the first rafts reappeared upon the river, and the old status quo re-established itself.

This of course is not unique to Rishikesh, it’s the global order of reality now as the wild spaces of the earth diminish yearly. People shrug when you talk of rights for the earth and its other inhabitants as if they need to earn their right to be here, so only if their presence pulls visitors who spend money can they be seen to count. And anyway, isn’t that what the different wild life reserves are for? Uttarakhand is one of the very few political entities to have enshrined rights to nature in its laws, yet to look at what is happening here, you would never know this.

[55] See: Rishikesh for Ravers

> What price the sacred? Far from being beyond the realms of profane secular reality, the sacred has now become merely another commodity. I could not convey to people outside of India what the river Ganges means in terms of Hindu beliefs and traditions. Merely to bathe in it is believed to wash away one's sins and prepare one for death. A small industry has now grown for people to take its waters in plastic containers (which are then discarded) for general use in home and temple. But now the gleaming, undulating body of sacred Mother Ganga hosts thrill seekers and water sports enthusiasts earning lucrative profit for the many business who trade off its fame."

Moving on shortly after I stayed down in Laxman Jhula, the district closer to the river where the famous pedestrian bridge was in the process of being replaced by a newer more robust incarnation capable of handling the enormous weight of so many people crossing it daily. From my little budget homestay, more reflective of my ever limited finances, I arranged for a puja at a small local Shiva temple, purportedly the oldest in the town and hidden way back from the main street. I had bought a couple of traditional Indian outfits shortly after arriving, when Sahdev had taken me into the main market town of Rishikesh itself. The puja was aimed to cleanse me of the cumulative influence and negative energies of life back in the UK across the previous winter and prepare me for this new stage, which I had understood was to be temple-focussed and re-iterative of the first 2020 year. There were two priests officiating and it followed a similar formula to the Rudrabishek puja in Varanasi in 2020, although with the smaller more intimate temple and fewer other devotees present. Sahdev dropped by briefly as a way to honour the ceremony and then disappeared for his next driving tour in the mountains.

So the next four weeks slowly passed with no real sense of where I should be or what doing, given I had to wait a full month for Sahdev's latest tour to be over before he could return and take me back up to Dharali, where I was planning to spend May in a small guest house owned by friends of his in the main village itself. I moved hotels several times, variously staying in Tapovan or further out and closer into the hilly area, venue of the earlier traditional village and new age spas, hotels and ashrams, defined by the course of a small stream that wound its way down from the higher regions into a series of small cascades, each it seemed bearing the title 'secret waterfall', where hordes of weekend

trippers hung out in the many trashy little camping sites that lined the route. I walked the full length of it one day, determined to make it to the end to the original secret waterfall, to find a rather disappointing pool, crowded with holiday makers and surrounded by small eateries.

The day finally arrived when Sahdev turned up to collect me from my last hotel and take me up to Dharali. He was shocked at where I was staying however, which was, in his opinion, full of 'bad' and 'very bad' people which I afterwards learned had the reputation of being something of a mafia haunt and red light district, otherwise belied by its pretty stream and forested hills setting.

Off Grid Living[56]

> "….my home is currently at a small guest house in a traditional Himalayan village. Living in Dharali is in some ways reminiscent of the different times I spent living in the Andes, the lifeways are so similar. Of course there are significant dietary differences given Andean people are enthusiastic meat eaters, including the Andean festive favourite: pork, eschewed here in what is largely a vegetarian culture (occasional chicken, eggs and, more rarely, mutton excepted), but also proscribed as profane within the Hindu religions. That other characteristic Andean all-purpose domesticate – the guinea pig – is similarly absent.
>
> As, at least until recently, a self-styled sadhu, purportedly living a simple life as a renunciate in a Himalayan village, I am well enough aware that this is stretching the definition of what a sadhu really is, in Indian terms, although the genre is eclectic enough. Certainly there are many sadhus on the roads around these parts given it is the main route up to Gangotri, one of the four important Chardham pilgrimage destinations. But whatever category of wandering holy man they conform to, they are clearly without home or possessions, dressed simply in plain robes, usually of the classic saffron colour.
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> As explained in my other website In the Spirit, I have never really opted for assuming the clothing, or uniform of any order, to demonstrate to the world who I am, or perhaps better said, what I consider myself to be. Throughout all of the main

[56] See: Rishikesh for Ravers

Pilgrimage years I always wore pretty much the same sort of clothing I have always worn, excepting for the times I conducted formal pujas at temples, when I generally had a special outfit for that purpose. More recently, in the run up to leaving the UK to return to India, I got myself a string of the mala rudraksha beads and a long orange silk scarf, which were important to define a sort of promise to myself, that I was returning to the sadhu life I felt I had lost touch with since the several returns made to the UK, and all that had entailed, in the previous two years. This new website was similarly envisaged. They were the outward expression of my inner intention. So, what happens when you complete the journey?

The two previous years seem to have been about just that: finishing the journey, although it is always hard to get a valid perspective on where you are when you are still in progress. Since my arrival – finally – here into the Gangotri region, I have felt the entire imperative of this extraordinary period, started at the end of 2019, fall away, together with all the props and adopted rituals that had been so necessary to sustain it. They seem irrelevant now. So what do I return with? I return with my Self (literally realisation or connection with what Eastern theology terms the Ātman i.e. Self[viii] and with something else too, the memories of that extraordinary journey that gave me what Jesus calls ‘the Pearl of Great Price’.

‘Off Grid Living’ has now become a concept to lure the affluent into investing in a vacation home somewhere ‘away from it all’, out in the wilderness. The plush interior furnishings and the table on the balcony set for two, the distant view reflected in a glass of wine, belie the hardness of real off grid life: the wandering of roads, the rough sleeping, the begging for food, the coldness of the nights at high altitude. This is the lot of the true ascetic, though whether all ascetics find eventual Enlightenment is debatable. It was never my lot to live like this, and I doubt I would have had the capacity to anyway, but I had renounced enough of the former life that had defined me, perhaps just enough, still to qualify.

I have used the term ‘sadhu’ more as a concept to define a period so necessary in any true spiritual seeker’s life, of leaving their world of mundane reality with all its conditionings and comfort zones, to go off into the real wilderness where the only true wisdom is ever found[ix]. That is off grid living. It’s strange, terrible sometimes, frequently obscure, entailing long empty periods when nothing much happens at all. It courts you with visions and tortures you with doubts, and challenges all of your

> cherished notions and norms. But there are moments so sublime, so inspirational, so impossible to be rendered into mere words, that when, eventually, you do return, you will never be the same again. It has changed you forever, and, as all true alchemical processes, will have remade you of gold."

An unpleasant, if trifling incident seemed to signal the imminent change about to strike. The morning after my arrival, after breakfast of parathas and hot chai on the balcony overlooking the surrounding extensive mountain vistas and the Bhagirathi river glittering in the distance, I decided to go out for a walk and down to the river, recently transformed by extensive machine works to redirect its flow and now minus the beach where I had first seen the beautiful heart within a heart drawn in the white river sand back in October 2020. I had no intention to go down into the Kalp Kedar temple precincts (sunken as it is) at this stage, but merely lingered on the top step to take a photo before continuing. As I stood there, I was accosted by a young man coming down the pathway shouting 'No, no, no!" and gesturing wildly at me. It is not generally forbidden to take photos of temples, from the exterior anyway and there are legions of photos of Kalp Kedar posted on line anyway. He gestured to my feet and told me it was forbidden to enter Hindu temples wearing shoes, a protocol I had known most of my life. Although there are directives at the entrance onto the pathway from the main road to remove shoes, practically everyone removes them on the top steps of the flight leading down into the temple precincts before going down, given the path is also the same that leads to the river where you do need your shoes on the stony river side. I should probably have taken it in my stride and not been bothered. He had evidently seen me as a tourist and foreigner whom he assumed was ignorant of Hindu traditions, but I felt mortified nonetheless and defensive, and we had a charged exchange before he eventually backed off. He was clearly a visitor himself and knew the temple far less than I had reason to given I had been there several times before at earlier visits, including doing pujas there.

I struggled to let the rather trivial incident go, and felt rattled for most of the rest of the day, affected by it into my depths, itself disturbing. After another cold night huddled under the heavy quilts of my bed, the following morning brought with it a sea change that evidently had been building in the unconscious depths and finally manifested itself as a complete loss of purpose together with the attendant symbolisms that had ever sustained it.

The Song is Over[57]

“Since arriving into India this latest visit I have felt as though under a sort of spell, and been completely unable to write. It feels more than a classic writers’ block, but something more ‘existential’ and serious. It’s as though a new cosmic order is emerging from the depths to displace earlier modus operandi and their attendant personality dynamics.

I [sometimes] talk about being ‘called’, but how should I explain this, what does it feel like to be called and how would you recognise this from something that can be experienced equally strongly, desire? The need to confront oneself and conditionings is a necessary prerequisite to undertaking the spiritual journey, so that one is better able to distinguish these, because otherwise and probably inevitably, deep seated unconscious desires will invade the system and try to hijack it for their own ends. Because of this, each new stage of the journey will often entail a difficult process of ‘stripping down’ of the innate self and a purgation of the will demanding complete surrender. This surrender cannot be achieved as an act of the will of the ego, but entails a process of submission to the dominant Divine will achieved through the actual circumstances of one’s life at that particular stage. This is not in any way a comfortable experience!

To be ‘called’ feels very different and manifests more as an insistent inner drive of psychic energy in a particular direction that will brook no interference. I have described it as being like a salmon returning to its spawning grounds across oceans, and up steep river courses, a drive that will brook no obstacle. There is no effective choice of the will in this whatever, but something that takes over the will and forces the process. How many times have I longed for the perceived simplicity of a more conventional notion of life than this all consuming drive for a goal so impossibly high it even defies description and involves the renunciation and sacrifice of everything deemed to be “normally human”.

So, what ‘song’ is over then?

[57] See: The Song is Over

The whole notion and attendant paraphernalia of this Pilgrimage conducted within the framework of the Hindu (largely Shivaite) religion entailing pujas at temples and explicit espousing of the associated beliefs and rituals, that started way back on New Year's day 2020 in Kerala, with my visit to the Guruvayoor temple. Although, in fairness, there was never a time when I actually internalised this practice in a way that led me to believe I had actually become a true convert, it was nevertheless accorded to me as a kind of 'visa' that permitted me to operate within that world with legitimacy. The calling I felt when still back in the UK, from Christmas onwards, to return here to the Gangotri region and to the ancient Kalp Kedar temple, was in the nature of how I described it above, producing the first version of this new website and blog[58], a set of rudraksha mala beads and orange pashmina, all representing commitments to return here. I arrived into India the day after my birthday and was based in Rishikesh for four weeks before I eventually was able to travel up to the mountains and I can see that that time was very necessary to prepare me by letting go of many of the earlier associations I had had with the place and developing the 'spiritual maturity' I had written of earlier.

And so I eventually arrived into Dharali late one afternoon to begin my stay. I was met quite unexpectedly with a sense of everything that had so motivated me to return in the preceding months being abruptly take away, as with the analogy of the rug being pulled from under your feet. It felt immensely destabilising to confront the total loss of everything that had represented the container for this Pilgrimage practically since its inception. Whatever the numinous significance of the mountains and associated scenery and however transcendental my earlier experiences here all evaporated into a complete nothingness. The region was just the region, the mountains and their sublime spruce forests just mountains with trees, the settlement itself just a small simple Himalayan village where people lived very basic subsistence lives.

Eventually over the succeeding weeks I was able to work through this experience to reach an understanding which allowed a new way forward. But although it is helpful, even necessary to understand, by constructing new frameworks of interpretation,

[58] The early incarnation of the new website was called 'Forever Sadhu', which eventually became 'Turbulent Priest'.

the actual experience itself can feel pretty annihilating when you have built your entire life and rationale upon it. I watched, as it were, the entire India experience and associated religious observances fall away from me totally, leaving nothing behind. As I was working through this, the May Shiva festivity took place at Kalp Kedar temple, attended by hundreds of the local community. Thither I also went, dressed as of old in one of my Indian festive outfits and made one final puja of letting go, when I left my mala beads on the altar. And I came away certain that this constituted the final and definitive ending of this period that had stretched on intermittently since my first arrival here in 2020.

So here I am in India now with no apparent reason to be here any more, the entire Trojan horse of the container it represented having fallen apart. Should this matter? Not really. It's not the container that matters, but what it contains. A religion or spiritual tradition is but the means to an ultimate end, not that end in itself. When you look at the substance of a rocket before it is launched into space, it seems immense, its physical body is composed of several parts, each designed to play a role in placing the object (such as a satellite) into orbit. Once that is achieved, or whatever the relevant stage is for that part of the rocket, then it will simply fall away, back toward earth to be incinerated in the earth's atmosphere. All that mattered was achieving the placement of the satellite into orbit. Unless you can break free of the container, then it could become your prison or your coffin. How many religions or so called spiritual traditions become just this? There is always a point you have to leave the conveyancer and continue your journey to its ultimate destination on foot.

And so where to now? Wherever the Spirit leads me. Time, as ever, will tell …"

I stayed in Dharali a full month in the end, trying to work through the severe sense of displacement the experience had given me. My days followed a predictable pattern of porridge and chai breakfast followed by walks: either along the road in the direction of Gangotri to where a small river gushed down from the mountains cutting the road to join the Bhagirathi, where I would sit on rocks by the fast flowing stream and meditate on the surrounding spruce forests and waterfall in the distance, or else down to the suspension footbridge and then along the track on the other side, negotiating the mule trains that regularly plied this route. An old holy man lived in a makeshift camp right at the side of the

bridge plinth on the far side and would I sometimes wave to him as I crossed. Here you could also hear cuckoos occasionally calling from the apple orchards up on the mountain side. It was always sublimely beautiful, but felt oddly more remote now. I tried to stabilise myself by framing it all as a walking holiday to provide a temporary sense of purpose. I had a good friend back in Britain who did walking holidays, but I was never able to escape the sense that something profound was changing. The Instagram account I had set up in the previous weeks and was attempting to keep up with felt increasingly superfluous and silly, with its exhortations of “#beapilgrim” accompanying photos of me at different temples, or illustrated aphorisms from significant people like Carl Jung. I had acquired a number of young Indian men as followers, occasional women and several other new age spiritual influencers who attempted to draw me in to their own operations offering psychic readings and the like, and that was about it, so I decided to discontinue with it and deleted the account altogether. It felt a relief and a step back in the direction of common sense and authenticity.

I left towards the end of May as originally planned, after the seeing the ceremonial procession taking the deity from the Maha Ganga, Mukhba Temple opposite the village on the other side of the river, back to its summertime home at Gangotri itself.

It was a hugely colourful and festive occasion where a group of devotees accompanied the statue on foot carried high on long poles and hidden within its crimson shrouded interior, much like some arc of the covenant. The slow journey on foot, starting late in the day as it did given the complex preparations and rituals required for its departure, could only complete half the distance back up to Gangotri, so what I hadn’t anticipated was that come evening, the sacred cargo was bundled unceremoniously back on top of a vehicle and driven back to its original site until the next day, and then back up again to where the same devotees continued with it to its final destination where it would reside for the remainder of the summer, until the first November snows.

The presiding priest who greeted its arrival back onto the road from the high pathway from Mukbar whipped up a frenzy of devotional enthusiasm from the crowds waiting to greet it, shouting through a microphone, the expansive scenery of deep cut gorges and high snow capped peaks with their spruce forests stretching away on every side, lending a magical Tolkienesque quality the whole setting and occasion.

Finally the departure day arrived and I packed up my few possessions and gave my embroidered shawl to Mira, lady of the house, as a keepsake. My journey back to Rishikesh started in the dark before dawn, the old land rover rattling noisily along the uneven road, its faulty exhaust system engulfing you in fumes, requiring the windows be open for ventilation despite the freezing air outside. Sahdev met us half way at Uttarkashi – the large sprawling lower altitude market town of the region and together we continued on back to Tapovan to where I had first lodged after moving on from Greenhills, the small unpretentious homestay in Lakshman Jhula.

I made one further puja at the Neelkanth Mahadev temple some 25 kilometres away, borne thence riding pillion on a motor scooter by the son of the guest house owner, and then made plans to travel down to Kochi in Kerala, ever an intermediary for me to acknowledge the ending of a pilgrimage stage. I was to spend four months there in all, lodged in a small Airbnb apartment in a largely Muslim area of the town, the five times daily call to prayer stridently audible from the mosque just at the end of the street. Here, finally, I was able to let go of the energies of the mountains and the north and turn my attention back towards whatever might be my calling to do in the coming year.

Sadhu Free Zone. Moving On[59]

> “From the heart of Fort Kochi in Kerala whence I arrived just a month ago, I am now ensconced in a small apartment in a largely Muslim residential part of town, which, being surrounded by mosques, offers ample exposure to Islam’s sacred quotidian rhythms starting with the call to prayer at 5 every dawn. Striking after so many months, years even, immersed in the strident Hinduism of the north, where Islam and Christianity even, kept a very low profile.
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> In such a religiously conservative part of town with its spiritual affiliations incontestable, I was stunned by the sudden appearance of Jehovah’s Witnesses one morning, preaching God, Jesus and the Bible together with very loud music broadcast in what seemed to be a clear challenge to the mosque at the end of the road. Aside from the language, which I presumed to be Malayalam, the local

[59] See: Sadhu Free Zone. Moving On

vernacular here, their presence, energy and manner of delivery clearly proclaimed them for who they were, no different in any other way to the bunch on the bridge over the River Wear in Durham shouting their wares, also to loud music, to deaf passersby back in February. My early impressions were soon confirmed by a support worker offering me a leaflet proclaiming eternal life as I walked by later. I was suddenly transported back years and many miles to the other side of the world and a different life stage, and my Salasakan interview assistant in Ecuador snorting contemptuously at the sight of Evangelists in the distance, “Evangelists looking for victims!” They have a strong presence in the Andes and specialise in destroying Indigenous sacred sites.

But I digress. Here finally in Kochi, I have been able to review the last three month period in India as it falls away, much like the scenery in a journey falls away from you as you advance along the road. The Pilgrimage cycles are indeed over. Their song is over. And with them, sadhus too it would seem, as, present on every part of my earlier journey, they have now completely disappeared. The sight of an orange clad figure in the distance will simply be a lady wearing an orange salwar or saree, never a renunciate on the road to salvation.

Now it seems I am about casting my nets wide again back into the ocean of life possibilities to see what comes up and herein does the Malabar coast and the Chinese fishing nets of Kerala offer fertile symbolism in the extraordinary richness and diversity of the daily catches for sale at the many small fishing stalls by the harbour.

And in the spices that were the lures and drivers of emergent globalisation dynamics for so many centuries here.

The exchanges have not always been admirable or easy, as with the arrival of exiled Sephardic Jews in the 16th century, from their erstwhile Spanish homeland. As with the brutality of the Catholic Inquisition in its determination to enforce orthodoxy. Now the easy eclecticism of Kerala reflects more its wealth of resources from the sea and the fruits and spices of the land. A real celebration of terre y mar.

How religion and the diversity of beliefs reflected in these lands will look in the coming years with the complex interplay of national and global processes, remains, however, to be seen.”

Life in Fort Kochi

I arrived into Kerala early in June, expecting to find the annual monsoon starting. Kerala is murderously hot in the early part of summer, but temperatures fall rapidly with the arrival of the first rains, a process which starts erratically with intermittent heavy showers, gradually increasing in frequency and severity. Temperatures drop, the mosquito population surges and summertime from then on is marked by high humidity and daily downpours. After a desultory beginning, the monsoon stalled for ten full days marking a return to very hot weather. My budget guest house had no A/C and, as the previous year in Goa, I sweated listlessly through long uncomfortable nights, windows and doors thrown wide open to try and catch any breeze, the overhead ceiling fans practically useless given all they do is whirl hot air over you, rather like an air fryer. Mornings would arrive with blood stains on the sheets where I had rolled over and squashed mosquitos full of my blood. I longed for the rains.

Happily I was able to find an acceptable apartment arrangement in a different quarter of the town, reasonably priced and with kind owners who lived on the ground floor of the building, also fortuitous given I had just started an extensive course of restorative dental treatment at a clinic which proved to be just five minutes' walk away from where I would be living for the next three months. I had my hair cut properly for the first time in several years, from the long style which marked the pilgrimage years into a stylish short bob, and bought a couple of new dresses. It was the start of a process which would gradually lead me back into the world I had been functionally estranged from for several long years. I pondered the recent crisis in the mountains from a safe distance of time and space and tried to make sense of what was happening to me.

A Work in Progress[60]

> "One of the most revealing, if shocking revelations of my recent experiences in the mountains, was as though seeing briefly and clearly behind a veil across a dimension to reality normally hidden. It showed me this: all my life, all the different

[60] See: A Work in Progress

happenings, choices, events, outcomes were all designed to lead me exactly to the point where I was then. There had been no other point or purpose to them whatever. I saw this in the way I do as an inner vision or revelation, difficult to explain to people who don't have these. This occurred shortly after my arrival coincident with the experience of having the entire Pilgrimage dynamic fall away, leaving me ostensibly abandoned and purposeless at the journey destination.

You are the work. The point and purpose of your life is you. Your outputs are simply the means undertaken to produce the unique you, not ends in their own right. For anyone raised in the highly achievement orientated societies we live in in the global north, or so called 'West' this is probably the hardest truth to come to terms with.

As we journey through life, hopefully upwards as well as onwards, there are different points reached where we can review our progress, the insights gained to that point and consider the way forward. This has been alluded to in the earlier post Revelations, Realisations and Epiphanies with people who have had mystical, revelationary experiences. I would also contend that part of this experiential process triggers different archetypal motifs not necessarily specifically relevant to that stage, but to the one that will emerge from it. A helpful analogy might be with Orienteering, or similar, wherein the affirmative of having reached the correct point in the overall journey and the clue to the next stage is found contained in some receptacle. A subversion or misreading of this, however, can lead the orienteerer to conclude that they have reached the journey's end and assume the credentials relevant to that, prematurely. Egoic inflations that conflate themselves with the identity of the Higher Self are examples of this. The 'Saviour' complex would be another, wherein the experiencer feels called upon to give themselves and their lives, either literally or symbolically, to the world and/ or humanity, and that only they have this mystical power to do so.

What should more correctly emerge from these experiences is a clue or a preparation of the individual as to that Higher Self's purpose, which possibly may indeed involve some ultimate sacrificial dynamic, which is, after all, an occasional part of the overall range of human experience. It might be observed here that many individuals who have found themselves making such a sacrifice of their life in some high profile way had not apparently ever set themselves up for it, or seen how

earlier life choices had predisposed them to their ultimate end. In other words, no ego inflation of any kind was ever involved.

To bring these two rather disparate threads of narrative together into a sensible whole, I would contend that we need to have life stage containers, for our developing selves that serve the purpose of evolving higher qualities in and versions of us. It's a kind of masquerade that is played with ourselves, that our lives really are about our goals and career pathways and the ego identities that go with these. We carry within us as part of our archetypal heritage motifs that we encounter upon stages of our journey, which does not necessarily mean we literally have to become these. They are the indicators of the range of potentialities that the Higher Self draws upon as an artist might a palette of colours. It is for that Self to determine our overall destiny, not us, although certainly we can and should be inspired by these to take the best symbolic analogies for ourselves in our lives. In this do they serve the Individuation process."

As the weeks slowly passed, I turned my attention back to the university research work I had once engaged in before I left everything to go to India in 2019. It seemed things I had let go of were coming back to me and I felt I should be open to them, given I had no strong idea of what this newly emergent period was about or what it would mean. Mornings I walked along the tropical harbour and foreshore past the famous Chinese fishing nets and fish market stalls and the beautiful old colonial Dutch and British buildings, one time customs offices and port authority headquarters, long re-purposed to serve the tourism and hospitality sectors. Reaching the Pandhal café[61] in the David Hall art gallery[62] I would while away a couple of hours writing before completing a circuit back through town to my lodgings. The town's autorickshaw drivers, who would endlessly harass passersby for business, came to recognise me and reluctantly accept I was always on foot.

"I know, I know! Walking, walking …!"

[61] https://www.pandhal.in/
[62] https://www.keralatourism.org/destination/david-hall-art-gallery/19/

In the Shadow[63]

“Since returning from the mountains with the understanding – finally – that it was time to move on and back into the world, I have witnessed a number of clear signs that different aspects of my personality – long remaindered -are being brought back into commission, as the more extreme spiritual incarnation of myself gradually recedes. To achieve a journey so demanding as the life Pilgrimage just completed, a different version of you is required able to interpret and enact the often extreme requirements and limitations being placed upon the psyche. It is fair to say from this vantage point, I can see what a very unipolar extreme version of myself I became during those years. Now, as so many of these long shelved aspects of myself return, the original ‘me’ with all its bad tempered tendencies, likes and dislikes is also there. I don’t know whether this is a good thing or not. When measured against the directives of Jesus or Krishna, as with ‘whose peace is ever the same’, perhaps not[64]. It might tend to imply then a failure of the what is generally considered to be the goal of the spiritual journey, to achieve transcendence into higher planes of being leaving the ego’s limitations and wayward tendencies behind.

Probably in common with a majority of folk I like to think of myself as a nice, polite, compassionate, user friendly person, never rude, abrupt or pushy. Way back in my Ecuadorian archaeological project days I can recall the shock of learning that very many people in fact experienced me very differently. Now perhaps I have moderated myself somewhat and smoothed off some of the rougher patches, but in the end my patience is still limited and the side of me that doesn’t take crap from anyone, at least for long, is ever close to the surface. There are many auto rickshaw drivers in these parts who would enthusiastically agree with this.

[63] See: In the Shadow

[64] *The Bhagavad Gita*. Ch. 2. Vs 48 Translated by Juan Mascaró. 1962. Penguin, Random House, India.

There is a small collection of photos taken of me from recent pre Pilgrimage years called ‘The Devil Wears Prada’, after the film of that name, where the principal character is always immaculately and stylishly turned out but, yes, otherwise a bad tempered martinet. It’s a manifestation of what Carl Jung called ‘the Shadow’, that version of ourselves composed of all those repressed character aspects generally hidden from view in many normal social exchanges. As long as we remain unaware of these, we will inevitably project them outwards upon others and blame (or admire) them for characteristics that are in fact our own. That is one of the preeminent purposes of yoga: to become consciousness of all of ourselves and our tendencies and work to transform and integrate them into a more powerful and purposeful whole. Because the shadow contains much concealed power. It is why we can feel intimidated by certain people we may admire, or dislike even, rather than seeing them as the mere people they are. Or even identifying the characteristics in them we admire or fear to see how we might enable or transform these in ourselves[65].

The self that bore the remit to carry me through the Pilgrimage cycles was rather in the order of what Jung understood as being his number 2 personality, itself a product of and emissary of the archetypal realm of the Unconscious[66]. That said, what happens seems to be more in the order of an inversion rather than an outright alter ego takeover. The dominant personality number 1 recedes and the usually recessive 2 comes to the fore, with all its specific skills to navigate the higher spiritual planes. When its job is over, it once again takes the back seat, albeit there to offer balance and insight across the remainder of the life course.

A complex process of reintegration of many different parts of myself seems to be underway, as the spiritual self and the worldly counterpart are reassembled into a different composite whole. I feel the energies moving this way and that, now revivifying my erstwhile South American incarnation, now the me that loves flamenco culture, the one time academic and so on. Given I let all of these go when I withdrew from the world to prepare myself for that journey of a lifetime, it seems

[65] https://www.thesap.org.uk/articles-on-jungian-psychology-2/about-analysis-and-therapy/the-shadow/
https://orionphilosophy.com/the-shadow-carl-jung/

[66] Carl G Jung. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Many editions. Aniela Jaffe (editor); Clara and Richard Winston, (translators).

amazing to me to watch as these come back. But I think what is happening is not a return to some former status quo with its attendant personalities, but a way of passing over the wealth of those personalities to the newly emergent self.

What the final product will look like remains to be seen given this is still a work in progress. If you did snap shots of the interior of a chrysalis it would presumably show a gradual shift from something looking like a caterpillar into something like a butterfly. Whether more caterpillar or butterfly at present remains to be seen, but the final whole must inevitably contain substantial inclusions of those shadow aspects that function, if properly channelled, to give not only strength, balance and direction to the psyche, but alternate potentialities and ways of seeing and experiencing life. This can only add dimension, depth and richness to the life course and one's experience of it.

The journey of Individuation is about this[67]. Denying important aspects of oneself, 'autocastrating' the ego to experience oneself as 'God' can never be what this journey is about, although all the principal eastern, mainly Indian theological and philosophical traditions and the many saints, swamis and satt gurus associated with them since the days of Adi Shankara, promote this understanding of the purpose of the life journey and its spiritual goal exclusively. Buddhism in its several incarnations too. However, in common with C.G. Jung I would argue this. In denying your individuality you deny yourself and, paradoxically, your Self. The Self is the Unmanifest Totality and each of us is a unique one time expression of It[68]. In Advaitist Vedantic terms we may all be made of 'God stuff' in terms of our being and

[67] https://scottjeffrey.com/individuation-process/
And: https://journalpsyche.org/jung-and-his-individuation-process/

[68] For further reading on Jung's concept of the Self and its influence in Individuation see https://www.thesap.org.uk/articles-on-jungian-psychology-2/about-analysis-and-therapy/individuation/
https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-1-4614-6086-2_368

> our consciousness, but our personality, our ego is all our own. It is our vehicle for independent life experience and in this do we offer up wealth to the Self that brought us into being, surely just for that purpose."

I was able, finally, to recover my art practice, long fallow, and produced a nice series I called 'Malabar', inspired from the tropical shores of the region, a sea change – literally – from the mountains and spruce forest themes that had dominated my earlier work. And when I finally wrapped everything up and headed back to the UK on the last day of my tourist visa validity, I took with me clothing and all the art materials and equipment I had bought there, as a sign that I would continue with these upon my return.

Reviving Old Desires[69]

> "It has been several long and not easy months since my returning from Kerala at the end of September, and my last post was written in the Pandhal café at David Hall, Fort Kochi, where I regularly went for morning coffee and writing.
>
> Since then it has once again been a saga of home hunting and setting up, with the Christmas and New Year period following hard on the heels of this.
>
> Here I seem set to be for a while anyway, back in the one time coal mining regions of Country Durham, but as ever my thoughts revolve around my spiritual journey like a planet the sun. Returning anywhere rather inevitably returns you to the erstwhile lives lived in them, even though you feel you have (or should have) moved on. In my case this translates into academic research projects, more especially the follow up to the one I concluded when I left my life behind and travelled first to India to start the Pilgrimage in November 2019. Following my first return to the UK in 2022, I then worked towards getting the original project report, barely finished before my departure, into a book proposal which finally resulted in its formal publication back in August. Now what?
>
> Going back to India at the end of March and all that followed from that, concluding with the month of May in the mountains, spelled out with stark clarity that the ritual

[69] See: Reviving Old Desires

phases of the Pilgrimage cycles were over and a return of some description was therefore inevitable (The Song is Over). What that might translate into was however less clear. Habit of mind underpinned by an overall cluelessness decided me on pursuing the follow up work that the original project had envisaged and so, upon arrival into Kochi, I worked towards this. Rather inevitably it was a struggle trying to regain those old ways of working, research, reading, drafting out potential proposals. These depended on intellectual and cognitive skills sometime since repurposed to support my higher spiritual journey. Deep down I know I lacked conviction too, but couldn't see my way to anything else, reading the cues as I did then.

Now I'm inclined to see it as a necessary container for bringing me out of the mountains, and back into the world. As discussed in earlier posts, I had become too caught up in the dynamics and lure of the Pilgrimage and those sublime and magical experiences that were such a part of them, and was constantly being drawn back, as the pull of a wave draws you back into the sea.

Those weeks in Kochi also found me able to recover the presumed lost art as I started – finally – painting again, working on a new series (Malabar) in a totally new style[70]. And assembling the already significant material written across the Pilgrimage years into a book of the same. In some ways it feels as though I had to recover the energies of the pre Pilgrimage years and repurpose them into a whole new vision. For, as Jesus tells us:

"No-one puts new wine into old wineskins"[71].

Sacrifices of good things still with life in them do sometimes have to be made for a new stage to be properly born. When you sow a new crop, you don't want seeds from the old one regenerating, producing more of the same. Hence the need for fallow periods, vigilance and work.

As the full year of this new experimental website approaches it has changed from being 'Forever Sadhu' into my new non de plume 'Turbulent Priest', drawing upon those turbulent dynamic creative energies that have ever been such important drivers in my psyche.

[70] https://turbulentpriest.net/turbulent-art/
[71] New Testament. Mark 2.22

Or, as with an earlier post here, that phoenix rising from the ashes!”

……

Part Five

Pilgrimage in Perspective. Understanding the Puzzle

Trying to make sense of your life when you're in the process of living it is like trying to describe the end of your journey whilst you're still travelling. Sometimes it seems like you've arrived at a place and a point which really do represent an ending of a stage and therefore (likely) the beginning of a new one and you have distinctive symbolic experiences that seem to underwrite this.

Every year since returning from the 'Nepal extension' I had struggled to fit my experiences within some sort of framework that conformed to a beginning, middle and end, only to feel it was more like a multidimensional game of chess you are trying to play in the two only dimensions you experience. Sometimes it seems to work, but mostly not. There are too many potential ways of understanding your experiences, like the filters you get in photo editing software which present the picture in any number of different lights and tones, from stark to gorgeous, softly colourful to weirdly outlandish. People who know you get tired of hearing these different takes on your personal story; you get tired of them too. You made that journey of a lifetime that so few people ever feel called to make; you never expected to return from it, but you did return from it, although with no template or guide book as to how to proceed thereafter. Do you get on with your life 'back in the 'world', perhaps like some Marco Polo when, after so many long years, he eventually found his way back to the Italy he had left for his travels in Asia, never to travel again? Or are you actually still on the journey, but merely a stage that feels like you're back in the world?

The Café Chronicles

> "I write this now from another café, in Rishikesh this time, that place and base I carried out the original Pilgrimage from, and where I seem called to return yearly to enact some obscure additional stage in this never-ending story, as it's beginning to feel. This café is certainly nice, with a good vibe, attractive style and the mandatory

views. And, uncharacteristically for these parts, soft Parisian-style jazz music playing of a kind I always loved and which reminds me of the years when I used to try and fit in a trip to Paris occasionally. The last time was over ten years ago now. As I write, there is a girl sat at a neighbouring table reading a well-thumbed copy of Eckhart Tolle. There were the times when the wisdoms from the spiritual masters and their modern counterparts seemed helpful and sustained you; then you get tired of them and their repetitive pieties that you've heard too many times before. It has always been my belief that you never escape the human condition, in all its complexities, poignancies and paradoxes, however hard you try. We were made to be human, not see it as a condition to escape from! And the legions of Tolles, Yogananandas, Sadhgurus, Krishnamurthys, Patanjalis, Bibles, Bhagavad Gitas and assorted spiritual guides ancient to modern will never expunge this, for long anyway. In the end we are still human, however you understand this. And I doubt massively the so called wisdoms of the east (in particular) which can seem to advocate a kind of auto castration of the ego as a way to proceed, and have written about this extensively in several places (see, e.g., In the Spirit. A Return to Self). Consigning yourself to an ashram or monastery, or signing over your autonomy to some guru is merely a way to avoid those life challenges and the inevitable suffering that as people we experience, which yet are the architects of ourselves in what Carl Jung called the Individuation process.[72]"

It is something I have come to believe increasingly as I have worked my way through my own pilgrimage journey, and all its attendant experiences and moments of enlightenment. It is well expressed in an excerpt from the life of the fourteenth century German mystic Henry Suso[73], produced in Evelyn Underhill's seminal work on Mysticism [74]:

"As his mystic consciousness grew, the instinct pressing him towards action and endurance grew with it. The inner voice and its visionary expression urged him on remorselessly. It mocked his weakness, encouraged him to more active suffering, more complete self-renunciation: more contact with the unfriendly world …. He must be a complete personality; a whole man. Instead of the quiet cell, the secret

[72]See, for e.g., "Individuation and the Self" by Martin Schmidt in The Society for Analytical Psychology on-line.
[73]Suso, H. (author) and J,M. Clark (translator) 1982. *The Life of the Servant* The Classics of Mysticism. James Clark and Co. Ltd.
[74] Evelyn Underhill.1930 (1912) *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness.* 12th Revised Edition. E. P. Dutton.

mortifications, his selfhood was to be stripped from him, and the reality of his renunciation tested, under the unsympathetic and often inimical gaze of other men. “The case of Suso is one that may well give pause to those who regard the mystic life as a progress in passivity, withdrawal from the actual world and the "Dark Night" as one of its most morbid manifestations. It is interesting to observe how completely human and apparently ‘unmystical’ was the culminating trial by which Suso was ‘perfected in the school of true resignation’”

> ‘None can come to the sublime heights of the divinity,’ said the Eternal Wisdom to him in one of his visions, ‘or taste its ineffable sweetness, if first they have not experienced the bitterness and lowliness of My humanity. The higher they climb without passing by My humanity, the lower afterward shall be their fall. My humanity is the road which all must tread who would come to that which thou seekest. My sufferings are the door by which all must come in.’

“It was by the path of humanity; by some of the darkest and most bitter trials of human experience, the hardest tests of its patience and love, that Suso ‘came in’ to that sustained peace of heart and union with the divine will which marked his last state. The whole tendency of these trials in the ‘path of humanity’ seems, as we look at them, to be directed towards *the awakening of those elements of character left dormant by the rather specialized disciplines and purifications of his cloistered life* (emphasis added). We seem to see the ‘new man’ invading all the resistant or inactive corners of personality: the Servitor of Wisdom being pressed against his will to a deeply and widely human life in the interests of Eternal Love. The absence of God whom he loved, the enmity of man whom he feared, were the chief forces brought to play upon him: and we watch his slow growth, under their tonic influence, in courage, humility, and fraternal love” (Underhill 1930 [1911]:304).

Beyond Enlightenment?

‘Beyond enlightenment’. What is that? Is there anything anyway beyond what many, certainly Eastern philosophical and theological traditions, promote as being the ultimate state of mind to achieve 'Liberation' (Moksha)? Something which is only experienced directly, not through study, even if study is accepted as a way to prepare for the experience. More generally it is a term associated with liberation from the limitations of

‘ego’ associated self definition according to worldly values, but more specifically in Monist terms, it is through the experiencing of yourself as the Higher Self and in recognising your essential identity with It. In the Monist Kashmir Shivaism schools, it is also called ‘Recognition’[75].

Despite a concerted endeavour to embrace more fully the Eastern Yogic philosophies, despite my initiation into the Shaivite tradition celebrated at the Rudrabishek puja in Varanasi[76], despite numerous visits to different Hindu temples to perform pujas at them during this period, and despite immersing myself in the principle spiritual literature, particularly across the course of 2020 during the India lockdown in Rishikesh, I have remained, at heart, firmly in the tradition of what is loosely called ‘Western Mysticism’, initially experienced through my early Christian upbringing[77], but later more generally so, especially as I advanced my studies into global Indigenous shamanistic traditions. I do not know if it’s possible ever to bring these two together into a satisfactory alignment either given the one is monistic founded on the premise that everything is ‘God’ (Brahman) with the experience of being an individual and separate ‘self’ via the ego illusory, and the aim of Self-realisation to experience that directly, whilst the other is dualistic (as indeed are many of the different Hindu, particularly bhakti traditions, and global religions more widely), wherein the spiritual aspirant seeks to bring themselves into an ever closer alignment with Divinity into what is known as ‘the Unitive Life’, but never presupposing an identity with the Godhead[78].

Throughout my studies, principally during the main lockdown year of 2020, my own ‘inner voice’, long understood by me as being the ‘Higher Self’ (Paramatman in Yogic philosophies; Henry Suso’s voice of Eternal Wisdom which spoke directly to him in visionary states) counselled that this study and pursuit was entirely unnecessary, given I had a direct connection with It anyway. This after all is a key definition of being a mystic, which Evelyn Underhill describes as being “that peculiar type of personality which is able

[75] As with the Recognition Sutras. See, e.g. Christopher Wallis, 2017. *The Recognition Sutras: Illuminating a 1,000-Year-Old Spiritual Masterpiece*. Mattamayura Press.
by Christopher D. Wallis
[76] see Part One. Passage to India. Varanasi
[77] I am no longer a practising Christian and haven’t been one for many years.
[78] Evelyn Underhill (1911; 1930) discusses this at length and rejects the notion of individual identity with the Godhead.

to set up direct relations with the Absolute"[79], although now it has become a very general description of many classes of esoteric pursuit or belief, many of so called 'New Age'.
It is a relationship itself highlighted in one of the principal Upanishads, those fundaments to earliest Yogic scriptures – the Katha Upanishad – which states categorically:

> "This Self cannot be attained by study of the Scriptures, nor by intellectual perception, not by frequent hearing (of It); *He whom the Self chooses, by him alone It is attained*. To him the Self reveals its true nature"[80] (emphasis added).

Which itself also suggests a dualistic relationship between 'Godhead' and the individual seeker.

The debates centring upon Monism versus Dualism abound and continue, but here is not the place to discuss them more fully and how I relate to each[81]. I have had several direct Self Realisation/Recognition experiences, recounted through the course of the narrative here, but nevertheless still hold to an essentially dualistic relationship with my experience of Divinity, with the visionary experiences I have had, and in the way I live my life. Given we all need our egos in much the way we need clothing to wear out into the world, as the vehicle for our independent life experience in the world and means to learn in it, then this is probably unavoidable anyway, given for the ego itself to behave as if 'God' (in the way, regrettably, of so many, especially those in power) is the ultimate form of delusion and of psychological 'inflation'[82].

Pilgrimage in Perspective

"No man is rich enough to buy back his past". This quote, attributed to Oscar Wilde, is one of several aphorisms adorning the wall of my dental clinic in Kochi, when I was living there last year. The poignant truth of it is undeniable.

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[79] Underhill, 911 [1930] Part Two: The Mystic Way. Chapter One, para 1.
[80] Katha Upanishad, Part 3 verse XXIII. The Upanishads. Translated and commented by Swami Paramananda from original Sanskrit texts. 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books.
[81] See: https://elizabethcurrie.info/eastern-theologies-and-western-mysticism/ and https://elizabethcurrie.info/dvaita-or-advaita-the-dual-non-dual-debate/
[82] Carl Jung writes of this in relationship to the inflation of spiritual seekers identifying with an archetype, and a danger on the Individuation life pathway. In this case this would be conflation with the higher Self archetype, see, e.g., The Society for Analytical Psychology: Individuation and the Self: https://shorturl.at/nhGNQ
And: https://shorturl.at/9hcVO

In eastern theological understanding your past loosely equates to your karma, with the belief that people's souls (loosely equating to the Hindu or Sanskrit concept of atma) accrue either a positive or negative charge associated with their life doings, and that many reincarnations may be required to atone for the debt of a negative karma[83]. And you will commonly hear people say that they are trying to do good things in order to build good karma for themselves, itself debatable given that doing good works merely to achieve good karma is not pure in purpose!

All major religions address this in one way or another. The Christian redemptive message is to have Jesus neutralise your karma at the end of your life through the one time sacrifice made through his crucifixion. The deal is you must believe in this and keep his commandments. It is most certainly not just a get out jail free card in the way it is often presented. For the majority who die still firmly attached to their karma, a long journey through purgatory ensues which the saying of prayers and the making of offerings, either by the deceased before death or by friends and relatives afterwards can reduce the time required.

In the several different Hindu traditions, karma is generally addressed through complex pujas, especially by relatives of the dead. Importantly, even good karma will bind you, which is to say bind the atma back to the world to be reincarnated again, after that good karma itself eventually expires, rather as credit in a bank account does. Anything that attaches you to the world has the power to bind you to it. The aim is to transcend the limitations of the human condition that draws its associations from the world. One of the reasons that many eastern theological traditions work to eradicate the dominion of the ego is because it operates almost exclusively within the human generated set of conditions which taken together constitute 'the world'. Undertaking Pilgrimage, in Hindu traditions generally known as yatra (3), to one or more of several sacred sites can also neutralise karma. Muktinath in Mustang, Nepal is acknowledged in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions to have the power to expunge karma and prepare the soul for death, especially if the pilgrim bathes in the sacred spring waters there.

[83] https://elizabethcurrie.info/2021/10/14/the-road-to-salvation-ascent/

Multiple lives and incarnations aside and keeping it more simply to the present life underway, it is nevertheless a truth that that past will have acquired its own positive and negative charges which may throughout the life course return to haunt you in the form of nostalgic memories, regrets, disappointment and so forth. Some of the experiences we have had, more especially whilst young, may well have been unavoidable, yet nevertheless cast their shadow over the maturing self through the life course. These don't in any way have to be 'evil deeds', simply our rather inevitable involvement in life's complexities as we gain experience and navigate the expectations that the world sets upon us, as well as 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'[84]. How do we deal with this, especially with experiences which have been particularly dark or difficult? How do we somehow stop the past from its long reach into our present?

Leaving aside any of the more deeply felt and private directives for undertaking the Pilgrimage discussed elsewhere[85], and the kinds of personal strengths required during the journey that may require taking upon ourselves a kind of alter ego for the journey[86], I will reaffirm that a major directive was always that given by Jesus in his exhortation to give up everything and follow him on the sacred journey. This being the only way to gain the pearl of great price (Matthew 13.45-46)[87]. This inward directive was strong enough to be felt by me many years earlier and I endeavoured to achieve this several times before finally the time was right to attempt it.

In giving up all I had and committing myself to the unknown in the way I did, with no prior plan excepting the inner guidance of the Higher Self, I disengaged from my past, and, importantly, from the world and its conditionings, be it I was still and indeed still am, a product of that past and the world. Some of my experiences and adventures have been documented in the blog series In the Spirit, although many have not. The Pilgrimage allowed me to go deeply into my past, and address and lay to rest the troubled spirits I found there, itself a way of disconnecting from old karma. But in the end the Pilgrimage cycles, across the period they were conducted, effectively drew a line between the me that carried them out and the me of my past. They re-laid my personal foundations. Although I

[84] From the speech by Hamlet "To be or not to be, that is the question". 'Hamlet' by William Shakespeare. Many editions.
[85] https://turbulentpriest.net/2024/02/03/the-price-of-enlightenment/
[86] https://turbulentpriest.net/2024/07/14/in-the-shadow/
[87] I am not in any way a formal practising Christian, despite nevertheless following the sayings of Jesus as my principal life guides, together with the Bhagavad Gita.

most certainly still remember my former life and most of its experiences, that life and those experiences no longer have any significant power over me. In that I have effectively bought back my past and bought it back with all that I had. This is something that any pauper or even billionaire can do as you always have enough for moksha, because it's whatever you have. This is what this journey of renunciation is all about. It deconditions you and puts you back in touch with those timeless truths. You might be in the world, but that world no longer has any power over you, to define who, how or what you should be. That is moksha, the path of liberation, freedom. But, as I have sometimes stressed, real freedom of this kind is the most expensive thing you will ever have, because you will pay for it with everything you have. But it is also the unique power of Pilgrimage.

Parting Words

> "Early in the day it was whispered that we should sail in a boat, only thou and I and never a soul in the world would know of this our pilgrimage to no country and to no end. In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words.
> Is the time not come yet? Are there works still to do? Lo, the evening has come down upon the shore and in the fading light the seabirds come flying to their nests. Who knows when the chains will be off, and the boat, like the last glimmer of sunset, vanish into the night?"[88]

When I started out on my Pilgrimage, I had no idea how (even if) it would end. To have planned an end would have completely negated the concept of such a journey, when you commit yourself completely to the unknown with all that means. At times I wondered, certainly felt, that I had or should become some sort of Sadhu myself, and be plying the sacred routes to different temples for the rest of my days. Clearly however, that wasn't to be.

In the East the path of renunciation is generally a lifelong one. Sadhus, the wandering monks, never return again to the world they have left. When their wandering capacities have come to an end, they generally settle in some sacred location such a Varanasi (or even Rishikesh) and wait for that ultimate journey of transformation – death – to meet

[88] Rabindranath Tagore. Gitanjali. 42.

them. In Western Mystic traditions, the final goal of the mystic's journey is union with Divinity, called, in fact, the Unitive Life (see above), after which they most definitely return to the world with a life's mission of some order or another, but one that serves the world with sacred work. By this I don't necessarily mean conventional 'good works' or works that centre upon religious or theological activities even, but something that helps to make the world a better place. In the Jungian and Post Jungian schools of Analytical Psychology, the true goal of the life journey, called Individuation, also presupposes that those who undertake it return to the world and society with healing gifts from their encounters with their personal and the collective Unconscious, encounters made in the strange worlds and experiences that their journey exposed them to[89].

It seems, then, that I must accept that, for the time being at least, here is where I must be and endeavour to be open to whatever work or new mission presents itself. Certainly at times this feels hard, to have engaged with the sublime heights, symbolised by my journeys into the high Himalayas, and that extraordinary year in India, only to have to come back and get on with life in the world. There may be no repeating those experiences, try as certainly I have across recent years, but I endeavour to feel simply grateful for ever having had them. I can recount extraordinary travellers' tales, of my journeys to ancient temples through one of the most difficult of recent times, across the Pandemic when so few people were travelling. And the visionary experiences of this time when I encountered Divinity remain beyond mere words ever to describe. This journey, although unquestionably difficult, always with a sense of making it up as you go along, being open to circumstances, to new insights, working constantly with yourself and your own personal limitations, testing every new situation or challenge for the kernel of truth it contains, itself the pointer to the way forward, has nevertheless been life changing and immeasurably worthwhile.

Former worldly notions of ambition; 'success', achievement, status, life style have gone, although I was never a very materialistic person and always someone who felt more comfortable with a simpler life. I achieved my real life's ambition to do this journey, and, having done it, I now feel more at peace. I might have attained, or strived to attain, the world, the riches and successes of the world, as illusory and transient as these always are,

[89] Martin Schmidt. Individuation and the Self. Society of Analytical Psychology. https://www.thesap.org.uk/articles-on-jungian-psychology-2/about-analysis-and-therapy/individuation/

but I would always have felt, at the end of my life, that the one thing I really wanted to do remained undone. Now it is done; the rest is unimportant “for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?”[90].

The Song is Over

At the end of March 2025 I made one final, if unplanned visit to India, spending some ten weeks living in Upper Tapovan until the middle of June. From here I wrote the Café Chronicles (see above) and from here I made one final brief three day visit to Dharali, to pay my respects to what I always saw as the epicentre of the Pilgrimage, and where I felt I could touch a deeper kind of spiritual base, with its beautiful location in the high mountains and the simple rustic life of the Himalayan village folk living their timeless traditions. I am glad that circumstances pushed me into making the trip earlier in the year, rather than later in the autumn as I had been considering; because now, Dharali no longer exists. On 5th August, a massive land and mudslide swept down from the higher mountains above, likely from a ruptured high altitude glacial lake following the heavy seasonal monsoon rains, and in six successive episodes across a mere few hours, wiped out the entire community: the modern settlement along the road and the traditional village itself higher up. Video footage filmed from the Mukbar temple opposite showed how the initial monster swept all before it, destroying all the buildings in its path and bringing them down upon people running for safety. I watched as the hotel where I had stayed twice in the previous years, first time in October 2020 during my first ever visit there where I had seen the hoopoe bird, crumbled like matchwood in the wake of the surge of rocks and water that hit it with such terrifying force. It was like watching some disaster movie and I wept uncontrollably, hardly able to believe what I was seeing. Many people miraculously survived and were airlifted to safety, including the family I had stayed with, although losing their homes and livelihoods. The guest house where I had stayed was completely buried under metres of mud. Some people had been at a festival at the Mukbar temple opposite, so watched in horror as the monster swept away their homes. The owner of the hotel where I had first stayed hasn’t been heard from since; and very many people were evidently lost beneath metres of debris. The old holy man who lived in his little makeshift camp down by the bridge could not have survived given the speed of the cataclysm and the mud and rubble which swept

[90]Mark 8: 36 New King James version via https://biblehub.com/mark/8-36.htm

all the way down to the river and the footbridge where he lived. The ancient temple Kalp Kedar where I had made several significant pujas marking different stages of my Pilgrimage likely survives, if buried deeply under the sea of mud. Possibly in time to come it might be excavated. Ancient Hindu temples with their curious distinctive and robust construction do seem capable of surviving these kinds of environmental assaults, as with Kedarnath several years earlier. Sahdev, who had sent me the news that morning, is shortly to visit the area by motorbike as the road is still blocked to mainstream traffic.
As humans we ever try to make sense of such events, which may yet be senseless, but probably inevitably it was something which spoke straight to my heart with a stark finality, that return was now impossible. It was like a line drawn between that time of Pilgrimage and its immediate aftermath and the present. I had to get on with my life now well and truly back in the world and Dharali and all it had meant would be just a memory, beautiful if poignant. And I think it unlikely that I will ever return again to India. That particular song, or those verses specific to it, are now well and truly over!

Truly these are life stages, each like chapters in a book and inevitably, finally, they have to be concluded and that volume find its way onto the shelf to join the others finished earlier. Life is a work in progress and as you are always living the final chapter, the real final chapter may never be one you actually write, or at least finish yourself at all.
I am grateful to India for all that it gave me, context and crucible for the remaking of my self from so many earlier versions into the person I am now.

Part Six

There's More to (being) a Pilgrim

During a recent visit to my one time home town Winchester in the south of England, the place where I had had so many formative childhood experiences growing up into a troubled young adulthood, I came across a large notice board advertising one of the the ancient city's premier educational establishments: the Pilgrim School - still exclusively for boys – a preparatory school designed to lay the foundations for later entrance into Winchester College[91] itself. The notice board proclaimed: "There's More to a Pilgrim" with its logo of the Coquille Saint Jacques scallop, symbol of the ancient and famed Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage route. The truth of this statement struck me forcibly to the extent I took a photo of it and made it into the wallpaper for my phone where it served as a useful reminder. Because there is indeed so much more to being a pilgrim than merely making the initial renunciates' journey.

The earlier chapters of this book chart my own journey, the principal pilgrimage years of 2020 and 2021 in India and Nepal, and then the long lead out period as I struggled to make sense of my experiences and understand what being required of me. I had apparently been returned to the world I left, but with no clear idea what for. The several returns to India, to Rishikesh and the mountains, reflect the bemusement of this time as I tried to reconnect with a lost sense of spiritual purpose and magic of those years.

As hard as the outward journey itself is, involving so many sacrifices and difficulties, the return to the world is probably in some ways harder. Again as observed above, it is generally the case that those on the higher spiritual pathways of renunciation give up life in the world completely and never return, opting instead for life in ashrams or monasteries, if not the open road. Returning to the world is considered by many to be a failure, itself suggesting that you were never able to achieve the Realisation being sought. I have certainly met people who seem bemused to find me 'back here again' when it might have been assumed I would never return. And indeed there are those sides of myself which are

[91] winchestercollege.org

similarly bemused and resistant to being back. But this is most certainly not a return to some former status quo. Coming back so transformed by one's experiences in the higher spiritual dimensions inevitably means that you experience the world and people in it differently, and after a process of coming to terms with what this means you can therefore get on with doing whatever is given to you with more detachment. The final steps of the Unitive Life[92] are found and made in this dimension, back in the world you left, not the high mountains and its temples at all:

> "The Unitive Life, though so often lived in the world, is never of it. It belongs to another plane of being, moves securely upon levels unrelated to our speech; and hence eludes the measuring powers of humanity. We, from the valley, can only catch a glimpse of the true life of these elect spirits, transfigured upon the mountain. They are far away, breathing another air: we cannot reach them. Yet it is impossible to over-estimate their importance for the race. They are our ambassadors to the Absolute. They vindicate humanity's claim to the possible and permanent attainment of Reality; bear witness to the practical qualities of the transcendental life. In Eucken's words, they testify to "the advent of a triumphing Spiritual Power, as distinguished from a spirituality which merely lays the foundations of life or struggles to maintain them": [842] to the actually life-enhancing power of the Love of God, once the human soul is freely opened to receive it." Underhill (1930): 309-310

The Beauty Within

A few days ago I made one of my now more occasional visits to conduct a puja at the famous temple of Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu, with the intention of completing a kind of circle. I had first visited back in the spring of 2019, a trip to the south of India based on Bangalore – which I had already envisaged as being a kind of dress rehearsal for the real thing planned at the end of the year, after I had concluded my project with the University of York where I had been based for the previous several years. This earlier trip was in itself rather significant given the last time I had been to India at all had been ten years earlier in 2009, a trip which centred almost exclusively on the south; It had been my very first visit to the country too. India then had been rather different to the world I now encountered, very much of the modern global order as it is. The vibrant resonant spiritual energies of the land were already far more muted and harder to connect with. I had visited several of the ancient Chola period temples the south is known for, Madurai being perhaps the most

[92]There are many descriptions of what this means in Evelyn Underhill.1930 (1912) *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness.* 12th Revised Edition. E. P. Dutton., but see the quote on Pp 309-310 in particular.

famous; also the huge medieval urban complex of Hampi, capital city of the Vijaya Nagara empire, long deserted, with its many temples too. Chidambaram represented for me then my first serious encounter with a form of Divinity I have long revered and thought the best possible representation of something so infinite and formless: Nataraja: the Lord of the Dance. To this day I have images of Shiva as Nataraja that form the centre piece of my private altars.

So returning to Chidamabaram became for me a kind of secondary Pilgrimage. The last protracted difficult period spent back in the UK also needed some kind of formal closure. And I saw it as being the time when I finally formally honoured the pledge I had given when I had first started out on this journey several years earlier, when I had given myself - as then expressed as my life and my death – to Divinity. After the formal outward stages of the Pilgrimage and the long difficult years that succeeded it back in the world, I had this strong feeling, underwritten by some important experiences, that that time was signalled as being finally over.

I had returned to India via Kochi in Kerala this time, unusual in that I had usually done this the other way around: coming from the north down to Kerala before leaving India back to the UK. So this was something of a first. My teeth prosaically had been the determining factor at a time when the vice-like grip of circumstances and conditionings finally held me trapped back in a world I felt I would never be free from; would just have to accept would be my lot for the remainder of my life.

Don’t Stop the Dance[93]

> On the 20th May 2025 I published my last post ‘Real an Unreal’, from Rishikesh in Uttarakhand northern India where I had spent the previous several weeks. Then I returned to the UK where I have been since, negotiating a different set of life circumstances and the challenges these brought. One of the final things I remember from my time in Rishikesh was dancing on the rooftop of the apartment block I was staying in in Upper Tapovan, to a really beautiful piece of music against the spectacular backdrop of the Himalayan foothills and the Ganges river glittering in

[93]. See: https://turbulentpriest.net/2026/06/09/dont-stop-the-dance/

the distance. It felt sublime, but in retrospect I can see how it also marked a kind of formal end to that protracted post pilgrimage period, when I had been constantly drawn back to try to recreate the magic of the pilgrimage years, but in reality to process the newly emergent self in its several stages. That dance was like drawing a line – finally – underneath a difficult and obscure period and allow space for a new one.

As if to underline this, on 5th August, my guide and driver Sahdev Rana contacted me with the terrible news of the destruction of Dharali – my special place and epicentre of the Pilgrimage – buried under an immense landslide during the heavy seasonal monsoon. He sent video clips taken by residents who had filmed it from the temple the other side of the valley, as vast walls of rock and mud surged down the river course, destroying buildings, submerging everything including the ancient Kalp Kedar temple, location of several of my private pujas. I remembered the old baba who lived in his camp at the side of the suspension footbridge, and the many people I had known and counted as friends there, and knew in my heart that this episode marked the ending of my relationship with Gangotri and that sublime period more than anything else. Absolutely there was no going back. And Sahdev has never been able to bring himself to go back either, special place as it had always been for him too.

Perhaps it has taken me this long to process that event sufficiently to be able to write about it; perhaps that is one major reason why I have never felt inclined to write a post since. It will never not be painful for me, but it now has been consigned to a kind of shrine in my heart where I might occasionally visit and lay flowers, but life goes on. There must be new special places and new dances to dance.

As I write I am planning to return to India in early September, for the entirely pragmatic purpose of getting my teeth fixed, which is to say finish the programme of restorative work undertaken in Kerala two years ago, about as non spiritual as you may imagine. This visit I will stay in the south and allow the north to recede into the past it now needs to be. I plan to make a short pilgrimage to Chidambaram, the famous Chola period temple to Shiva as Nataraja – the Lord of the Dance – as old as York Minster and dating back into 10th century CE. I last went there during the visit I made in early 2019, which I regarded as a sort of dress rehearsal for the main pilgrimage period planned for later that year. But I shall base myself in Fort Kochi

where I lived for four months back in 2024. And continue to write at the Pandhal Cafe midway along the tropical shore front on my morning walks.

I had never thought to go back to India again, exhausted across several personal dimensions of the whole travel experience and challenge of that country, and feeling I should probably make a more determined effort to settle down and rediscover what it was to be a British citizen whilst I still had the ability to do so. But it wasn't to be. Prosaically, my teeth have determined that!

Now, as I continue to refine my plans and come to terms with the thought of going back, I do feel more at peace with it. There are new dances to be danced and places to dance them. And nowhere more evocatively symbolic than the ancient temple of Shiva Nataraja at Chidambaram. Don't stop the dance! "

Having spent six weeks in Kochi, a tale all of its own, I left to make the trip to Chidambaram via the French colonial town of Pondicherry, somewhere I had been to a couple of times before and liked, its vibe is very different from Fort Kochi with its Portuguese, Dutch and British influences as epicentre of the historical spice trade. Pondicherry also lays claim to being a spiritual hotspot where Sri Aurobindo founded the still thriving eco spiritual community Auroville, and where many spiritual luminaries claim to have gained their personal Enlightenments in his ashram there[94]. The journey was tiring, involving a long wait over at Bangalore airport, but I finally made it into Pondicherry before sundown, then had given myself a full day to recover before heading onward to Chidambaram itself. The seaside here being the Bay of Bengal towards the tip of India is very different to how it is on the western side of the Arabian Sea. A day of wandering along the seafront enjoying a sense of escape from Kochi, where I had begun feel rather stuck in an endless loop of morning and evening walks along the lush tree lined harbour front or promenade down to Pandhal; when I wasn't shopping, making occasional outings with Freddy the rickshaw guide out into the surrounding region, or otherwise seeing my dentist.

It was an early start to arrive in good time for the mid morning puja at the temple, so we were on the road by seven. I had had a nice taxi driver who picked me up at the airport, so I had rather hoped it would be the same man, conspicuously Hindu, who also said he was a devotee of Nataraja, but it wasn't to be. This driver was a young man who seemed to be

[94] Sri Chinmoy was one.

in the throes of developing some serious respiratory virus which had him coughing, clearing his throat and nose loudly all the way. He drove like a maniac too, constantly sounding his horn and overtaking on the inside of the traffic. As he spoke virtually no English whatever any communication was next to impossible. Rather inevitably it cast a cloud over what should have been a time for inward preparation and gentle anticipation. The journey there was about two hours and then we had somehow to agree how to find each other after I came out of the temple. By the time I had managed to track down a toilet first, then make my way to the entrance, I felt raw, stressed and definitely not in any mood identifiable as spiritual in any way. But the sound of the mantras to Mahadev being broadcast with loud solemnity as I turned into the narrow street approaching the temple had that effect of somehow bypassing the superficial irritations and discontent of the world and striking deeply into the visceral centre, like some shock and awe.

I had been fortunate to arrive just as another major puja was taking place and hundreds of other devotees were crowding into the inner temple quadrangles where they could see the priests preparing the incense, fires and offerings. At intervals, immense bronze bells were rung, which, together with loud mesmeric drumming and the sounding of the long trumpets set a rich sonic context for the whole experience. Chidambaram is an ancient temple of the the Chola period 12th century AD and is ornately decorated in that style, so everywhere the devotee is surrounded by colourful visual images of divine personages, including Nataraja Himself, overseeing all. I had wanted to carry out my small private puja in front of an image of Nataraja, but it wasn't to be, as wherever such an image could be seen it was always in a place impossible for such worship. So I had to be content with making my private ritual and offerings at a little shrine well away from those of the main temple.

As is so often the case, indeed has ever been the case, I was the only conspicuously foreign looking person there, albeit suitably dressed in an outfit bought especially for the occasion, but most everyone ignored me anyway, treating me rather just as one of them, a fellow devotee. As I emerged from the inner quadrangle after the main puja, a priest looked at me and smiled; another man later asked me where I was from. I had caught the eye of other people there who had smiled, but that was all. I had felt quite accepted there and unremarkable. And unusually, despite being at times caught up in the press of dozens, nay hundreds of other people, raising their arms and chanting and shouting to 'Govinda'[95] I

[95]Govinda is in fact a name for Vishnu, not Shiva at all, yet I clearly heard one man shouting this name, so I presume to many people it has simple become another general name for God, such as Bhagavan.

didn’t feel in any way out of place, overwhelmed or claustrophobic. Yet legion are the occasions I can feel this way in other circumstances back in ‘the world’ as it were.

Eventually, tired and hungry, but feeling I had achieved what I had set myself to do, I found my way back to the waiting cab and prepared myself for what was to be a long, uncomfortable and stressful journey up to where I had booked a night in a guest house close to Tiruchirappalli airport.

But my abiding memory of this long anticipated occasion of the visit to Chidambaram temple was of the sense of the elaborate high theatre of it all, and how everyone there was there to get some sense of the Divinity of their devotion ‘out there’, when in fact It is already within you. Not all the colourful rituals: the chanting of mantras, drumming, ringing of bells, lighting of flares, burning of incense could summon That which is already there, albeit for the many hidden in a way they may never see or experience directly in anyway. They are the rituals and paraphernalia of projective dynamics, from what is within to the outside, to see and worship It there.

I say this with feeling because the previous night I had been vouchsafed one of my rare sublime direct experiences of ‘God’ – Higher Self - kindred I imagine to samadhi, where I felt in complete union with It and the blissful knowledge of this, as with what the early Western Mystical tradition describes as being the mystical marriage to God. You are not one and the same as It, but in a mystical union with It[x]. Probably inevitably words cannot do justice to what is an essentially mystical experience, and given it is something innately of ‘the present’, trying to recall what it felt like afterwards is also unsatisfactory. I have had such epiphanies before, outside of any proposed religious observances it should also be pointed out, but this one was most certainly one of the most profound, affecting me for the rest of that night. A pity then that the journey and driver had rather eroded some of the magic of the memory and sublimity of it when I was conveyed to the temple the following day!

After resting that night at the small guest house in Tiruchirappalli, I caught a dawn flight north to Dehradun, via Hyderabad and back to Rishikesh – itself epicentre of so many of those earlier Pilgrimage and post Pilgrimage years - to see what would now be expected of me. I had returned, against all the odds, to a place I vowed I would never return to, but with a sense that a firm boundary had importantly been laid between those earlier times and leaving this new stage open to what would follow.

Rishikesh

The many posts I have ever written about Rishikesh across the post Pilgrimage years from 2022 onwards document my disenchantment with the self styled yoga capital of the world. Like some abusive relationship impossible to break free from, I have lost count of the numbers of times I have left vowing never to come back, only to find myself back there again the following year. In trying to account for its pull on me I have sometimes described it as being the closest place geographically to where I need to be spiritually. But those days of long trips up into the mountains with Sahdev have receded rather into the past and especially since the destruction of Dharali – my special place – back in August 2025. I saw that episode more than anything as drawing a line under that past leaving space for something new. So now, when I have seen a whole new stage of my spiritual life journey opening up after the puja at Chidambaram, it seems once more that I am being called back here again.

The place itself hasn't changed at all. It is still full of yoga schools and ashrams, hotels and guest houses large and small filling every conceivable slot of once vacant land, restaurants, cafes and street food outlets serving the immense itinerant tourist population both Indian and foreign, boutiques with fashionable bohemian clothing springing up everywhere to attract the yoga and wellness groupies, temples, sadhus, swamis zooming around on motor scooters, ambulant cattle, stray dogs, and hordes of traffic bearing the vast population of domestic tourists in or out: land rovers bearing rafts and white water rafters down to the Ganges; large billboards advertising the latest shock adventure to thrill seekers from the cities.

Much of this book has been about making sense of my experiences, not during the actual Pilgrimage itself, or of the rationale for undertaking it in the first place, but what the years following when I returned to the world I had left, signified; what purpose this period served. The initial period from 2022 reflects my confusion and sorrow at having left those 'sublime heights' and returned to a world where I had lost most of my erstwhile wordly life skills and had to relearn how to navigate life and circumstances all over again, but this time from the strange place of having lost any sense of a belief or investment in it. I had lost all my ambition and any real interest in what the majority of people count as a 'normal life'.

As observed elsewhere, it seemed to be a necessary requirement, that you do 'come back' bringing gifts perhaps back to the world from those higher spiritual planes you

experienced, that relatively few other people do. In the Jungian school of Analytical Psychology where the Life Pilgrimage is understood as Individuation[96], it is also presupposed that the one undertaking these extraordinary journeys will eventually return for just that purpose – to the benefit of wider society; Jung himself certainly thought so. But from this perspective I find it hard to see in what way my experiences have been to the general benefit of wider society in any real way. Most people are not really that interested in your 'journey' or experiences thereon and merely tend to regard you and your tales of suffering and renunciation for the Highest as being well, flaky or simply incomprehensible. Unless you relearn the language of the world and the objectives of its principal drivers, then you have little enough to offer anyway. In a materialist consumerist world there is no real understanding of renunciation, except for a relatively few people perhaps. We are all conditioned to acquire, not to give up! My website, designed in the Nepal phase of 2021, offers ample information, guidance and resources for those on the spiritual journey, yet I give the link to it to few enough people who I think might really benefit from it. The majority of folk now seem more inclined to consult the different AI Chat Bots for life guidance, than people like me. And the collected wisdoms of saints, gurus, and swamis with their commentaries on life and the spiritual experience will likely some time since have been fed into the vast data bases that AI now commands. So much easier perhaps, to ask Claude, Gemini or Chat GPT, or other of their relatives for advice, than taking the time and effort to read it in the original texts! And then, just as importantly, to think through what is being said.

Now I am more inclined to see this lengthy, certainly difficult period as being 'the other half of the wave' if you like, the dynamic of the positive surge of energy inevitably followed by a negative retraction in preparation for the next outward flow, the two being inseparable. In the post "Works Still To Do" written towards the end of June 2022, I speculated upon the purpose behind this calling back to the world I had left, understanding it as 'works still to do'[97], which I then interpreted as being actual work outstanding from the university project I had finished[98]. Now I am more inclined to believe that the works still to be done were, in fact, work on myself, still undone when I left for the Pilgrimage, which is to say, those deeper conditionings and psychological complexes that remained with me, albeit inert

[96] See for e.g., "Individuation and the Self" by Martin Schmidt. The Society of Analytical Psychology
[97] Rabindranath Tagore. Gitanjali. 42.
[98] Eventually this was published as: Elizabeth Currie and John Schofield 2025. "*Indigenous Concepts of Health and Healing in Andean Populations: Understanding the Relevance of Traditional MEDICINE in a Changing World"*.London and New York, Routledge.

given the peculiar circumstances of the journey I made which left them fallow, to be reactivated when the conditions allowed.

The experiences of that time showed how a number of deep seated psychological complexes still played out in me in all sorts of ways. That time, as difficult and unsought as it was, allowed me to apprehend and lay to rest some of these confounders that had been intricately bound up in my personal dynamic for most of my life, barely observable and little understood, and generally interpreted as being just a part of my personality. In the true practice of yoga, (which is to say the entire practice of self observation, jnana yoga, meditation etc, not just hatha yoga) the process of self awareness allows you to apprehend these unconscious dynamics and work with them to achieve an overall more balanced ‘freer’ personality, less susceptible to being hijacked or subverted by unconscious conditionings, in the way that unseen ocean currents can pull a ship off course.

Honouring that which cannot be

Honouring those who pass. Halloween and Day of the Dead

As we pursue this journey of life, this journey in life, there are those who seem to accompany us for a time; but there generally comes a time when they are no longer able to. Writing now on the cusp of October’s ending and November’s beginning, I realise that I have been rather unwittingly drawn into an unplanned process of honouring dying and dead old friends and relatives, which is to say aspects of myself which can no longer continue this journey with me. The dreams we commonly have of being with a particular friend or relative are often just about this, aspects of ourselves best symbolised by that particular person.

Our relatives are our relatives and given we had little choice with having them, and often grown up from childhood with them, they can signify deeper associations. Throughout the life course however, we acquire many other aspects who I shall call friends here, whose purpose it is to adapt us to different life circumstances and help carry us through them; they usually have specific interests of their own too. It is easy to mistake them for being ‘you’ given they operate through you as it were, but I think this is a mistake, as the core ‘you’ - your self - is actually something rather different. I also talk about ‘drivers’, but I think these are more specifically designed to convey you places, rather as a driver does. My general dislike of the culture of my home country or particular aspects of the lifestyle there

is a good example of one, as it lends power and agency to those instincts which have ever made me feel I needed to ‘escape’.

The friends I speak of here are subtly different, but these can, if held onto beyond their original purpose, bind you to a particular period and related circumstances and prevent you from moving on. In some ways they mirror the real life friendships we have with different people and most of us know the feeling of a relationship which has run its course and no longer meets the needs of a newly emergent life stage and its attendant personality.

Arguably the most significant friend in my life was the one that conveyed me to South America and to Ecuador within that, firstly in its guise as an archaeologist, then more generally as an academic with interests in local Indigenous cultures and related. This friend was with me across most of my life in fact, from the days as a young post graduate student aged twenty six, to most recently in 2018, when my academic project with the University of York that had taken me there again, was finally ending and I knew that I would never return; India was already beckoning by then. The friends I am now bidding a sad farewell to are none other than my artist and writer selves, which have pretty much been with me forever, certainly since my childhood when I was always drawing pictures and writing stories I have an earlier website pre-dating In the Spirit by several years which advertises me as an artist, writer and photographer and is a platform to showcase my work of that time. As much as anything though it reassured me that I had a worthwhile life, creative purpose and, most of all, *identity*. It was what I have called elsewhere here a ‘container’ for my inner self of that time. Throughout different life periods during periodic lacuna when I felt I had lost a sense of what I was supposed to be doing, I would fall back upon this identity as a helpful camouflage.

But, as I write and indeed across these most recent months, it has been clear to me that they no longer have the power they once had to define the person I am, or to provide those helpful containers for specific periods of one’s life. I feel sorry for the artist which was ever rather the neglected one, with priority usually going to the writer, and this of course was the one that carried me through the many academic projects I did, as well as more creative writing ventures that led me to writing and self publishing two novels[99]. Now, neither seem relevant any more. So what, then, does that leave me with? Perhaps the strangest and most recent friend - the Pilgrim - the one that took me on that journey to

[99] ‘The Lady of Seville’ and ‘An Indian Affair’ self published under my name Elizabeth Currie

India in the first place, then up to the high altitude temples. Finally it seems to be with me again, obscurely absent as it was during those several difficult post Pilgrimage years from 2022 to recently.

A Journey to Self

I am not these days overly given to quoting the so called spiritual masters, but I have mentioned earlier Sri Krishnamurthy's concept of the 'pathless pathway', that strange mapless journey wherein all the directives for it are apprehended from within, like the upwelling of wisdoms from the deepest layers of the psyche.

Writing now from Rishikesh where I have been this last month, you see very many posters and adverts everywhere for the different yoga schools, and sundry practitioners of different esoteric arts; impossible to escape them. A few days ago I saw this:

> "Yoga is the journey of the self, through the self, to the Self".

Much as my website: In the Spirit. *A Journey to Self*

It's also what Pilgrimage is essentially all about, as explained there. Across what I sometimes still feel were 'the lost years' from 2022, I felt primarily as though I had lost my connection with that journey, that pathway. Although I still had a strong, if intermittent connection with the Higher Self, the sense of being on that Sacred Journey really wasn't there. It felt puzzling, frustrating and somehow suggestive of an obscure 'failure'. It was why, in the end, I felt I had no option but see it as a call to revert back into that householder life of earlier years, something I had given up by stages before starting the Pilgrimage in 2019, with periodic attempts to re-establish myself in a life back in the UK.

Recently, however, the sense of being back on the Sacred Journey has returned, hard though it is to express in 'mere words'. 'Pathless pathway' is also the term for the way it operates given you are guided by deep unconscious directives; there are no formal maps. I rather call it 'the shining pathway'[100] which you mostly feel rather than see, but in those deep places of the psyche accessed in quiet moments when connections with the Self are more readily made, you may also briefly glimpse it, glinting rather like a deep well spring or underground river when some light temporarily shines on it.

[100] though regrettably that term was used by the Maoist terrorist organisation of the same name in Peru in the 1970s.

Pilgrimage is like this. Anyone can travel aimlessly around the world with all manner of notions about why they are doing it and what they hope to achieve. The ‘lost years’ from 2022 at times felt rather like this, like I was making up some rationale for doing what I was doing and calling it ‘Pilgrimage’. I have met people in the course of my life who spend their lives doing little but this, essentially on a pathway to nowhere, just passing life time.

The 2020 – 2021 Pilgrimage cycle demonstrated my commitment to the Journey as a ‘return to the Self’ if you like[101]. It was an investment of renunciation and sacrifice for that Higher Self, but perhaps, too, as I have recently thought, something of an ‘audition’, to see if I really did have the necessary requirements to be acceptable for the ‘real thing’. What, then, would ‘the real thing’ be?

It is now October and the intense heat of summer here is finally abating, with regular electric storms bringing thunder, lightening and deluges of rain; with cooler mornings and evenings. I made my most significant Char Dham temple visits in October of 2020 and left finally in mid November – at the time of Diwali actually – back to the UK, the mesmeric chanting of the Kedarnath mantras to Shivalinga broadcast across the surrounding snowy mountain peaks still fresh in my memory. I am due to go back into the mountains again in November with Sahdev to pay my respects to Dharali – finally. It is something I have been avoiding knowing too well the pain that seeing it will cause, but if all I can do to honour that place and its people is to share their pain, where once I had such joy there, then so be it. It seems to the least I can do. So I suspect I was brought back to Rishikesh for just this reason. Then, perhaps, I will make my way back to Kerala again – that perennial staging post – and see where to and what from there.

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[101] As put in the website In the Spirit. A Return to Self.

[i]A 'Saiva' is the name given to someone who follows the branch of Hinduism which reveres Shiva as the Supreme Being (aka God).

[ii] I have described this term 'vision' in the essay 'In Defence of Faith'. Sometimes a vision is actually that, the seeing of something, like an hallucination perhaps. In most cases a vision is the mystical apprehension of an ultimate truth and something experienced inwardly, not via the mind. People commonly employ different substances (Ayahuasca, Hashish, Peyote etc) to induce altered states of consciousness in order to have visions or insights of this nature as an 'easy route' to 'Enlightenment'. I have discussed this practice extensively elsewhere in the website (pages still in development). It is not a practice I have ever engaged in myself and would urge caution to others tempted to do so for reasons explained there.

[ii] 'In the Spirit' is about my personal journey to the Sacred, more particularly during these last two years. During this journey, oft referred to as 'Pilgrimage', I make references to some of the more mystical experiences that I have had. At times I have attempted to describe these more fully, as much as it is ever possible to do this, but the blog itself is merely a diary, an account of the more secular and practical aspects of the journeying itself. Many people do not particularly enjoy or want to have another person's spiritual ideas and beliefs forced upon them, when all they want is an entertaining account of a life as lived and the sorts of experiences, insights and comical moments that this can offer. The main body of the website is devoted to my own views and beliefs as evolved through my journeying, although this is still in development at present. But for interested readers, that is where the more spiritually orientated accounts and ideas can be found.

[iii]The river here is actually called the Bhagirathi river, one of the two headstreams of the Ganges. However, it is generally viewed as being equivalent to the Ganges and visitors to Gangotri commonly take receptacles for its water.

[iv]Footnotes from post: Image of Kalp Kedar temple under snow courtesy of unnamed photographer at Google maps. Image of saffron clad pilgrims on the high mountain roads courtesy of Sahdev Rana. The four Chota Char Dham Pilgrimage destinations are: Yamunotri, Gangotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath. I have been to the last three, visited before leaving India in November 2020.

[v]Footnotes from post: 1. I explain the concept of 'enlightenment', oft referenced here, more fully in: https://elizabethcurrie.info/2021/10/14/the-road-to-salvation-ascent/

The 'deep work' of true yoga is discussed in several of the different pages of information in this website. It is what is sometimes called in eastern theological parlance: jnana yoga.

2. 'Satsang is an audience with a satguru for religious instruction. The name satsang is a Sanskrit word that means "gathering together for the truth" or, more simply, "being with the truth." Truth is what is real, what exists'. Excerpted from: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satguru

3. See 'My Parting Word': https://elizabethcurrie.info/my-parting-word/

and:

4. 'Postscript. Final thoughts from Rishikesh': https://elizabethcurrie.info/postscript-thoughts-from-rishikesh/

[vi]Footnotes from post: Featured image: Dawn over the Ganges, Varanasi (March 2020).

1. Rabindranath Tagore. Gitanjali. 42.

2. Martin Schmidt. Individuation and the Self. Society of Analytical Psychology. https://www.thesap.org.uk/articles-on-jungian-psychology-2/about-analysis-and-therapy/individuation/

[vii]Footnotes from post: 1. Rabindranath Tagore. Gitanjali. 42. Quoted in full in "Works Still to Do" https://elizabethcurrie.info/2022/06/20/works-still-to-do/

[viii]Many theologies, particularly Christianity, use the generic term 'God' for this, whereas the far more nuanced and meaningful term 'Self' (Ātman in ancient Sanskrit text) is most often used in Eastern theologies. I discuss this and related concepts in https://elizabethcurrie.info/of-god-and-self/ and https://elizabethcurrie.info/self-and-self-realisation

[ix]"The only true wisdom lives far from mankind, out in the great loneliness, and it can be reached only through suffering. Privation and suffering alone can open the mind of man to all that is hidden to others." — Igjugarjuk

[x] I have described this at different points throughout the text here, see for e.g., pp 216: 'Beyond Enlightenment'. Sometimes referred to in the Western Mystical tradition as the Mystical Marriage, it is also known as the Unitive Life. In Indian theological advaitist traditions where everything is Brahman, the individual jivatman ie the individual soul is

considered one and the same as Brahman and the aim of all yoga practice is to see and experience this directly.