

Pilgrimage to India 2007

The India trip was inspired by my 60th birthday. Given my 60th birthday was a major event; I thought I should do something momentous for this occasion. I happened to be out to dinner with a few monks from the Lake Shrine and we were talking about my birthday. I mention that I thought I should do something special and take a trip somewhere. As it turned out Greg Bell, who owns Master's Darshan Tours, was sitting at the table and he had a trip going to India leaving on October 4, 2007. I thought it was rather a major coincidence and a good positive sign since my birthday was October 5. I signed up and became another member of this small group. There were only nine people in this particular group, so I thought I would be better off because the group was small. I never liked traveling in large groups anyway, so I thought this would allow for more personal experience and less group craziness.



Once I receive the itinerary I noticed that the departure date was October 4 from LAX, and the arrival date was October 6 in Singapore. Where was October 5, my birthday? Apparently it disappeared across the international dateline. I thought this was a great event given I would not have a birthday at all. This could be the secret to longevity, spend every year in the air across the international dateline. I would no longer have birthdays and I officially would no longer have birthdays!

Once the trip began I was somewhat disappointed to realize that we made a brief stop in Tokyo for 45 minutes. This 45-minute refueling station existed on October 5. So I did have my birthday in Tokyo, in the airport for about 40 minutes.



When we landed in Singapore I, unfortunately, discovered that our bags were checked straight through to New Delhi so we had no luggage. I was beginning to learn that our illustrious leader was not strong in the organization skills department or leadership tasks that one would expect from the tour leader. We were not adequately prepared for this stop.

The Singapore stop was a short transit stop for about 12 hours. We arrived in the early evening, had an overnight stay in a downtown hotel and again departed New Delhi in the early afternoon. Unfortunately, now residing in Singapore I had no change of clothes, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant or shaving equipment. Moreover, the hotel was not helpful at all in supplying any of these basic necessities for the transit traveler's journey. So the following morning after only about two hours of sleep I ventured out into the virgin Singapore territory to exchange money and buy my basic necessities. Unfortunately jet lag and sleep deprivation must have taken its toll upon my brain.

Prior to my departure from Los Angeles, I purchased this great travel wallet in order to stay fully organized and to protect my documents. Unfortunately it is a bit cumbersome to keep taking this wallet on and off around my neck, so my system became rather unsystematic and sometimes I would have it around my neck and sometimes I would place it in my backpack. Given that we had about eight hours in Singapore, I had the desire to explore the local city along with a few of my new travel mates. Because I have had some skin cancer, I thought it wise to get a hat and some sunscreen. There was a very nice golf shop adjacent to our hotel where I was able to purchase these items. I had a nice conversation about sports psychology with the local staff and even gave them my business card for future business possibilities. That card came from my wallet, and that was the last store where I purchased anything. Upon leaving that golf shop, I walked next door back to the hotel, met up with my friends, and we began our stroll along the streets of Singapore. We took a boat ride on the river, strolled along the banks and eventually found ourselves at the local Asian Museum. There was a small entrance fee of five dollars, which I was happy to pay. However upon opening my backpack to extricate my wallet, it was nowhere to be found. I searched every compartment and every little crevice and but no wallet. The stark realization hit me. I was in Singapore in a foreign city with no identification and no money.

I spent a lot of time organizing my passport, which contained my Indian descent, my credit cards, my traveler's checks and my California driver's license. All of these items were in that wallet. I had not money and no identification. I must say I did have a few moments of sheer panic running through my mind. However, I had vivid memories of the many American Express and Visa international commercials that promise to help foreign traveler if ever in need, anywhere in the world. I knew that I could have my documents replaced within one

day. So my mind quieted down and I knew that in a short period of time I would have all these things replaced. However, before totally giving up I spent the next hour backtracking my steps and visiting every store that I had stopped in that morning. I returned to the 7-11, the local drugstore and the golf shop. We even returned to the boat where we had taken our river tour. None of the local business people claimed any knowledge of my wallet. As a side note, it is well known that Singapore is a very honest city and when I called the police they thought there was a very good chance that my wallet would show up. They thought that someone might turn my documents into the authorities and I might have it back within a few hours. The penalties for stealing are severe in Singapore. So while I was hopeful that maybe this would happen, at some deeper level I knew my documents were gone forever.

It is now approaching three o'clock and her group had to leave. It was time to return to the airport for the next leg of our trip. Unfortunately I could not join them because I no longer have my passport nor a visa to enter India. The tour leader did come through and secure my stay at our local Singapore transit by giving his credit card to secure my stay until I could re-create my documents. He also was kind enough to loan me \$500 of cash so I would have some spending money. He wished me well and as he was about to depart. I did ask,

What happens when I arrived in India? He assured me,

Don't worry, Sandhya will be there to greet you and reconnect with our group.

Sandhya was the owner of Network Tours and had worked with Craig Bell for several years. Given my experience so far, I was skeptical. However, I was staying positive and hoping that she would be at the airport upon my arrival in India. Hope springs eternal.

So now my next mission was to go to the airport and obtain my luggage from Singapore Airlines. I accompanied our group back to the airport, went to Singapore Airlines check-in and informed them of my unfortunate situation and asked to have my luggage removed from the airplane. As a side note, Singapore Airlines is one of the greatest Airlines in the world. The people are friendly and the culture is oriented toward service. It took about an hour but with the help of a very pleasant flight attendant, I retrieved my luggage. My next objective, upon the advice of the Singapore Airlines staff, was to complete a full police report. Fortunately there was a police station at the airport. So I made my way down into the

basement of the airport, and found the police department and spent two hours going through the process of creating my police report. This turned out to be a godsend because the police report actually helped serve as some form of identification for me in days to come.

So now it's about nine o'clock in the evening and I returned back to my local transit hotel.



Some of which you see on TV is actually true. American Express and Visa international are there to help stranded travelers in time of need. I called American Express and their support staff was the best help I could imagine. I was able to obtain a new credit card and traveler's checks on the next working business day. Their international support line was also very helpful calling the Indian embassy in San Francisco in an attempt to get my original Indian visa. The American embassy in Singapore was also a stranded travelers heaven. The American staff was friendly and eager to help and I obtained a new American passport within a couple hours on Tuesday.

It is important to note that I lost all of my materials on Friday and Monday he was Columbus Day in the United States. The bureaucratic mentality is the same around the world. Columbus Day was a holiday in the United States so the American embassy in Singapore celebrated this American holiday. The Indian embassy in the United States also took advantage of Columbus Day and closed their office on Monday. So it actually took me till Tuesday to re-create my US passport, my credit cards and my traveler's checks.

At this point I had all my documents except for my visa. The Indian embassy was very difficult. I first went to the Indian consulate on Monday the day before I had my new passport. I explained my plight to the security guard at the front gate and he told me that it was impossible for me to get a visa in Singapore. I was not happy with this answer so I told him that I was going inside. Once inside, it look like the California DMV. There were a number of windows with women staffing those positions. I approached one pleasant looking Indian woman and explained to her by need for a new visa and she told me that they could not help me. Again I was not happy with this response so I asked to speak with the supervisor. I was informed that Mr. Singh was busy and I would have to wait, which I did.

After about 10 or 15 minutes I was able to enter the office of the supervisor Mr. Singh. He was a pleasant looking Indian man who is nicely dressed in Indian clothing and never once looked up from his desk to make eye contact. I explained that I needed a new visa in order to get to India and he informed me that it would be very difficult. I would have to apply and wait 10 days. I informed him that I could not wait 10 days because I was on a spiritual pilgrimage and my group was moving further and further away from me everyday. He suggested I returned to San Francisco to obtain my original ten-year visa and then continue my trip. Personally I thought the suggestion was rather crazy and I told him that was not an option for me. I did have the thought, which I shared with Mr. Singh, that I could contact the Indian consulate in San Francisco and have them FAX me proof regarding my 10-year visa. Mr. Singh took a liking to the suggestion and said,

Yes that would be very good. Come back when you have the proof. So I left.

The next day being Tuesday, I returned to the Indian consulate with my new US passport. I was hoping that my prayers to Babaji may have taken hold in some part of Mr. Singh's consciousness and he would be inspired to issue me a new visa on the spot. A upon my return to the Indian consulate I was once again advised to wait for Mr. Singh's availability. Again after 15 or 20 minutes, I was once again in the presence of Mr. Singh. I showed Mr. Singh my new passport and again inquired if I could get a visa. Once again Mr. Singh informed me that I needed some proof from San Francisco but quite unexpectedly asked his administrative assistant to FAX the San Francisco Indian consulate and request the proof. I asked Mr. Singh what I should do and he said,

I will call you when I get the document. Go back to your hotel.

I did return to my hotel and continued to make phone calls to San Francisco in an attempt to expedite the process. Unfortunately the San Francisco Indian consulate never once answered the telephone and even the American Express Travelers assistant staff could not contact them. So all day Tuesday and all day Wednesday I remained a tourist in Singapore. Unfortunately I never heard from Mr. Singh on Wednesday and my hopes of getting to India were beginning to fade. I began to think that perhaps this trip was doomed and my negligence was going to cost me dearly. Mentally I was beginning to make other plans.

My time in the American embassy went rather quickly as I met a rather attractive local Singapore woman who had dual citizenship. I asked her if she wanted to have dinner that evening and she agreed. I had a pleasant evening and found out that she was about to depart for London to visit her daughter. I suggested that I might go to London and visit her there if my India trip could not be salvaged. She seemed quite open to the idea and since I have never been to London I thought this could be fun. I contacted United airlines to see what could be done with my ticket and was informed that because I was using frequent flyer miles once the trip began there could be no changes. The only use for that ticket was to get to New Delhi and fly home. In fact, the one leg from Singapore to Delhi was wasted since I had already missed it. I had to purchase a new ticket to get from Singapore to New Delhi. So my fantasy trip to London was gone and I became more determined to get to New Delhi.

Thursday morning I woke up feeling rather discouraged about getting into India. I was prepared to purchase a return trip back to the United States but I wanted to at least give it one last try at the Indian embassy; eleven o'clock Thursday morning I am back speaking to Mr. Singh.

Mr. Sing, did you get the FAX?

No, but not to worry. If they said they would send it, they will. Just be patient, it will arrive.

Mr. Singh, I am running out of time. Either I get to India or I have go back to the United States. Each day my group is getting further and further away.

While we were having this brief conversation his administrative assistant showed up holding the precious FAX: San Francisco had responded! The paper was obviously there. It was a good thing I returned to the office. I might still be waiting for that call. Mr. Singh was now eager to assist me and get me on my way to India. He directed his staff to expedite my visa because I was a tourist.

Don't make him wait, he ordered.

Within 20 minutes and 200 Singapore dollars I had my new visa. I must admit that prior to this successful conclusion I had seriously considered offering Mr. Singh a bribe. In fact, I had a conversation with a taxicab driver and he suggested that I should try to bribe Mr. Singh. He said all the bureaucrats are corrupt and they need payment. Given this was the first time I had considered bribing anyone, I was not exactly sure about the going rate. After a few moments of reflection I thought \$50 might be the appropriate amount so I actually had 50 Singapore dollars in hand as I was sitting there speaking with Mr. Singh. Since the paperwork was going through and I did not have to bribe him I was so overjoyed with Mr. Singh that I now wanted to give Mr. Singh the \$50. So I offered him the money and he started yelling at me,

What are you doing giving me the money. You are supposed to pay the money out front. So it appeared that offering Mr. Singh a bribe would not have been a good idea. I chose to act stupid, apologized for my ignorance, went to the front desk, paid my money and received my new visa.

It was now early afternoon in Singapore on Thursday and I was hoping that I could get a flight out that evening. However that was impossible, all the flights were booked and my first opportunity to depart Singapore was on the Saturday evening 11 p.m. flight. I still had a few more days of being a tourist.

Finally, Saturday evening arrived and I was on my way to New Delhi. Prior to my departure when Craig Bell was still in Singapore a week earlier I asked him what will happen when I arrive New Delhi. He assured me that Sandya would be there to greet me and take me to the Alka hotel. Given my experiences so far I was not expecting anyone to be there at the Delhi airport. I arrived around 9 p.m. and was still hoping that somebody might be there but alas there was no one to be found. I knew from previous conversations with Craig Bell that the Alka Hotel was a dump and I did not want to stay there. During my week in Singapore I had spoken to a good friend James in the United States who was about to depart for India and told me he was staying at the Claridges hotel in New Delhi. He said the rooms were reasonable around \$200 and it was a nice hotel. So my plan was to get to the Claridges hotel. I gathered up my bags and found my way to a taxicab section outside. I was a terrorist fresh off the boat ripe for picking. I did get a taxi and was charged three times the

normal rate to get me to the Claridges hotel. Since I had no reservation and was walking in off the street, I was hoping they had a vacant room. I was in luck and they did however, the price for the room was 450 US dollars. It was about midnight now and I did not have much choice, so I took the room. It turned out to be a good decision because the support staff through the concierge was wonderful. That evening and the next morning they began calling all over India and found the hotel where my group had been just a few days before in Rishikesh. The next morning I hired a driver and a car and proceeded with the six-hour drive to the holy city of Rishikesh.

Driving on the Indian roads is not for the faint of heart. The roads are packed with automobiles, trucks, animals, three Wheeler's and people. There are two lanes, with no lines. People are always honking their horns and passing at the same time. So from all appearances, you are always about to have a head-on collision, and at the last moment the cars swerve and avoid impact. In this frenzy of movement around animal drawn carts, trucks and scooters they all seem to work it out and avoid head-on collisions, most of the time. Unfortunately my driver had a very slight accident when the car on the left tried to inch its way in front of us, and the bumpers scratched. And the driver of the other vehicle was a very large and very angry Indian male. He pulled in front of our car, stopped the entire flow of traffic, which was already backed up for miles, got out, came over and started yelling at my driver. To make matters worse, he reached in, turned off the engine and pulled out the keys. My driver was now forced to exit the car and go after the man to retrieve the keys. This one large angry Indian man began shoving my driver and attempting to scratch him with the key. I was in the backseat of my car, a keen observer to this unfolding drama. I was in no mood to get out and engage in a physical confrontation with this Indian stranger. So instead I sat there intensely chanting Om Guru. Om Guru, Om Guru. I was hoping Yoganandaji would intervene through some hidden plane. Fortunately for all of us, the angry Indian man lost interest in this argument, threw the keys back to my driver and walked away. My driver returned to our car. Once inside, he apologized and informed me that it was his duty to get me to Rishikesh and he was not going to fight the man, besides this man did tell him that he was going to shoot him. My driver believed he had a gun. So in the best tradition of self-preservation and India's Mahatma Gandhi, he chose the path of nonviolence. Once again we were back on the road to Rishikesh.

My time in Rishikesh was short but very memorable. Upon arrival at the Palace Hotel the telephone rang while I was checking in. Much to my surprise, it was a tourist agent from the river camp just north of Rishikesh. My group was at this campsite and the hotel manager Shivani, was kind enough to call him an alert him of my presence. They were prepared to come down from the river camp and gather me up so I could be reunited with the group. However, since it was late in the day, and they were one and a half hours away, I decided to spend the night in Rishikesh and have them come for me the next morning. That evening I was able to go to the Arati and do some simple shopping. The next morning I woke early and returned to buy a few more Indian shirts. As I walked along the banks of the Ganges, I entered the first clothing store that was open. There was a young man selling clothes who was very interested in meditation and the spiritual path. We made an instant heart connection and began to talk about my spiritual pilgrimage in India. He requested my help in his spiritual development, and although I tried to direct him to the local YSS society for spiritual guidance and meditation help, he insisted he wanted my guidance. I agreed to help him and suggested he send his information to me via e-mail. In a few weeks, while I was still in India his e-mail got lost and I'm still hoping he will e-mail me again and make one last attempt to contact me. As I was returning to my hotel walking along the Ganges River, I stopped for a moment to enjoy the devotional chanting that was being played by a local storefront. As I stood there an enormous presence of love and joy filled my entire chest and touched me to the depths of my soul. The energy was so intense I thought my body would explode. It only lasted for a few seconds but the healing affect was dramatic. I felt my heart expand and deepen. I stood there for another fifteen minutes in a state of reverie. I was so grateful to receive this blessing in Rishikesh, which continues to be one of my most favorite cities in India. It has a history of many, many saints and sages who have blessed this sacred soil with their presence.



A few hours later two drivers from the Ganges River Camp arrived at my hotel to take me to the group. The River Camp was in a very pristine setting. The water was crystal clear, the sandy banks were untouched by any human footprints in the silence of nature. It appeared

to be a meditation setting right out of Siddhartha. The following morning my early meditation on the banks of the Ganges was blessed by the divine presence of Yoganandaji. Once again my heart and soul overflowed with love and devotion. For some unknown reason Rishikesh blessed me with the healing presence of spirit. I am very grateful that I was able to visit this sacred city.

The next leg of our journey took us up to Badranath, a lovely city high in the Himalayas at about 11,000 feet elevation. The accommodations were very nice, as the hotel had been recently built. However it was very cold because the hotel rarely turned the heat on. Even though I slept in my down parka, I was still never warm. The few days spent in this city were mostly filled with shopping, hiking and sightseeing. It is worthwhile to note that one member of our group was a Hare Krishna devotee. She was constantly chanting Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Hare wherever she went. In fact, it was impossible to have a moment of silence while she was at your side. Although my own spiritual practice has a depth of meditation and silence associated with it, this was impossible and her presence. Her constant devotional offerings began to affect some others in our group like Chinese water torture. In fact, in Corbett, a natural wild game preserve, one of our members started screaming at her during an elephant ride in the jungle. The purpose of the elephant ride was to observe the wildlife, and hopefully see tigers and other magnificent creatures of the wild. However with the constant drone of Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Hare all game was being scared away. One man on her elephant could not take it any longer. He started screaming at her,

Can't you shut up? Just shut up! I can't take it any more, just shut up!

Needless to say, I did not hear any reports from them that they had come across Bengal tigers or king cobras.

The next segment of our trip took us to the sacred city of Varansai. We flew from New Delhi and then took a 30-minute automobile ride to the Rashmi Guest House on the banks of the Ganges. Varanasi is a fascinating city with small catacombs like alleyways that take you deeper and deeper into the heart of commerce: along these alleyways are homes, shops and temples. The pavement is scattered with garbage and cow dung and the paths are so narrow there is no room for automobiles. It is like a maze once you get off the main street and our hotel was accessed through this network of alleyways.



The first morning of our stay in Varanasi we set out for Sarnath, the city where Buddha gave a discourse to his first by disciples. We

left the hotel with our guide Ramu, who is a professor in archaeology and a Palm reader. He took off at a fast pace and we quickly followed behind. I was taking photographs to document the trip and stopped for a moment to capture a father and his son. When I looked up the group was gone. There was a path leading to the left and the path leading to the right, unfortunately, I had no clear memory of which route they took. I made my best guess and went to the right. I took off at a rapid pace. After a few minutes, it was obvious that the group was nowhere to be found. I was getting no closer to the Main Street and only going deeper into the catacombs. I stopped and accepted my fate. I had lost the group again and now on my own for the afternoon. My first thought was to return to the hotel. Instantly a young man appeared who offered to take me there. But first he said, "I want to take you to my guru." I thought this was a great idea. Perhaps it was a blessing that I had been separated from the group. I was on my own about to see a holy man and perhaps have a major mystical experience. I said yes and we began to walk. Within a few steps a sweet little dog appeared and joined us. My newfound friend informed me that this was his dog. He was a happy good tempered little white dog and I was happy to have his company. However within a few more steps five dogs appeared from my left who were not so happy about the presence of this dog. They began to growl and instantly there was a dogfight. So right in front of me, blocking my access to the holy man was a dogfight. I had visions of being bitten by a dog in India and I thought this was not a good omen. I had no desire to get into the middle of this dogfight so I turned around and gave up my quest for the holy. My newfound friend quickly appeared apologizing profusely and said he did have to protect his dog. Being once a dog owner myself, of course I understood. He now offered to take me to his uncle who owned a silk shop. I thought a little shopping at a silk shop would be fun so I consented. I spent about an hour there, bought some presents, had some custom clothes made and was ready to leave. As we were exiting his shop, once again my guide wanted to take me to his guru. I thought perhaps this time we might make it. However, after a few steps I felt the vibrations around us getting darker and darker and decided this was not a good choice. I abruptly stopped and informed my guide that I was no longer interested and was going back to my hotel. He guided me back to the main road and at this point I could see the Ganges River. I knew that my hotel was somewhere to the left along the river bank. Rather than attempt the alleyways again, I decided to go along the route of the river. Once at the riverbank, I asked the locals for directions to my hotel. They informed me that I could not walk there because the river was in the way and it was too dirty, I must take a boat. "How much does the boat ride cost?" I inquired. "150 rupees." The price was right and so I accepted. Once we got into the boat, I could clearly see that the hotel was about 100 yards to the left of where I was standing and the access was totally clear! At least now I knew where the hotel was. However, before the boatman would deliver me to the hotel, which was now clearly in sight, he informed me that we should go to the burning ghat. And thus my afternoon adventure was extended slightly and went to the holy place where people long to be cremated.

The scams in India are never ending. A new person joined my boat and began to present a fund-raising proposal for the hospice center that was located above the burning ghat. He wanted about 1000 rupees and I was not sure if it was a legitimate request. So I informed him that my group would be returning the following day and if this was a legitimate request we would give him a lot of money if not he should be happy with the 150 rupees and I gave him on the spot. It should come as no surprise that I later found out that this was a total

local scam rip off. I found it a little disconcerting that the group did not even notice my absence until they had been at the temple in Sarnath for over an hour. Apparently one of the group members noticed I was not around and asked, “Where is Ron?”

During my brief stay in Varanasi, I had a premonition that some type of spiritual experience was forthcoming. The following afternoon I was placing a small object on my altar in my room when a rather prolonged déjà vu filled my consciousness. I knew that I had recently performed this very same action but I could not place where. The sense of timelessness was prolonged. A few minutes later I was in the hotel restaurant and as the waiter leaned down to place a glass on my table the fabric of time was ripped away. It happened so suddenly, it really took my by surprise. I had no sense of being grounded anywhere and while I clearly saw this young man standing in front of me, there was an immense void of timelessness all around us. My ego was a bit terrified because I felt like I could fall into this timeless abyss. This state also only lasted for a few seconds but I still have a clear memory of that reality. And although it only lasted for a few seconds, now having been back in the United States for almost 3 weeks, I feel changed in some very subtle and profound way. I feel more internalized, deeper and more expanded.

For some unknown reason Varanasi held a very powerful energy for me. At a psychological level, I also had a rather profound healing. I have had a reoccurring experience, typically when I'm about to fall asleep, where I feel all the cells of my body hurting as if I was in the microwave oven. It is a very painful experience that appears to reside in my subtle energy body as much as my physical body.

During one of my meditations, I made a connection between this painful energetic experience and a past life memory of being abandoned by my parents due to their death through drowning somewhere in India. In an attempt to heal this most painful memory, I attempted to use my imagination to create a new scenario. The one that seemed to be the most effective had my parents swimming away to safety and raising me in a loving healthy happy family. So now when I turn inward and feel that little boy within, he is happy content and full of love. This experience appears to have resulted in my heart being more open and a greater desire on my part to be with people.

The flight home was long and grueling. When I arrived back in the United States at 12:30 PM, I was pretty tired. On my way home I checked my messages and returned one call regarding some SRF Lake Shrine business. I left a message for Michael on his answering machine and said, “I'm back in the United States, call when you get a chance.” After a couple hours of unpacking, I was pretty exhausted so I laid down to take a nap. It was pitch black dark in my bedroom when the phone rang. I opened my eyes and was certain that I was in Delhi. I picked up the telephone and it was Michael. I said,

“Michael, how did you get this number I'm in Delhi? Michael said,

“Delhi? You said you were back in the United States.”

I was attempting to make some sense out of this distorted reality and I thought perhaps it was call forwarding but then I had a clearer realization, I must be dreaming. I said to Michael,

Michael I must be dreaming. He responded with great yogic wisdom,

Ron we are all dreaming.

About this time I was able to turn on a light and realized that indeed I was back home in the United States. It is good to be back in the USA.

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