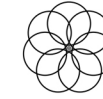


## My First Yogi



After a few months at home in Indiana, my brother Dave invited me to live with him and his family in Gainesville, Florida. It was a chance to reconnect with him and to get to know his daughters, my nieces. Dave also was an English literature major and wanted to support my ambitions to write about my experiences in Sierra Leone.

Writing was my way to come to terms with the reverse culture shock and to think through what was next — did I want to go back to Sierra Leone or stay in the U.S.?

Living with Dave and his family was physically comfortable; they went out of their way to have me be part of the family. He and his wife both were getting PhDs while working and raising three kids. They had busy and full lives. Meanwhile, I was still reacting to the abundance, wealth, and waste of America, and was living on West African time with no sense of urgency. I am sure I was more than they bargained for.

The writing I did was all focused on a concept I called the *ball of balance* to describe how the Earth has a delicate balance that is being threatened by Western consumption. Flashing between the U.S. and Sierra Leone, my intention was to provide a fresh perspective on the Western pursuit of happiness and its impact on the environment and people who lived thousands of miles away; all the while not providing a level of happiness that could be experienced through a deeper sense of community and connection with nature.

I had not intended to seek a spiritual path or a teacher while in Florida — the idea had not even entered my mind. It just happened.

Within the first few weeks, I went to an art festival and struck up a conversation with an artist. After hearing about my Africa experience and writing ambitions, she suggested I go to the Temple of the Universe.

The following Sunday, I found myself driving my brother's car into the countryside outside Gainesville to a wooded area. Several cars were parked along a gravel road, and people were walking toward a single-story, wood building nestled in trees and covered in Spanish moss.

The smell of incense and patchouli oil was in the air as I neared the door. Following the example, I took off my shoes, placed them at the door, and went inside. There were no chairs, just pillows on the floor. Everyone was sitting cross-legged with their eyes closed. On the walls were pictures of various people, most of them Indian-looking. The only photo I recognized was Christ. I later learned the images were of yogis and other illumined beings from many different spiritual traditions.

The room slowly filled, and then a thin man with a graying pony tail walked in, nodded to a photograph, sat down, and started to play an electric keyboard instrument. He began singing some strange song and everyone responded. Back and forth it went, with this guy calling out and everyone else responding, similar to some of the singing in Sierra Leone, where one person would lead.

After the chant, there was silence for several minutes. I noticed the thin guy, who I later learned was Mickey Singer, had a huge, almost exaggerated, smile on his face.

Mickey then began to talk, and I tried to listen without moving too much, but my legs were getting cramped and my butt sore. He mentioned something about when a yogi goes inward; there was a state of consciousness that was beyond desire. None of it made sense, yet, I was intrigued.

Following the service, everyone filed outside to a large open field. They joined hands in a circle, said a prayer, and then shared tea and cookies. There was a sense of community, in nature, centered on a spiritual connection. Even though it was all strange, my heart soaked it up, as it was the closest thing to Kagbere and

Masongbo I had experienced since coming back to America.

Every Sunday I would go to the Temple and listen and then join in the community circle. I loved that the Temple was in the woods, kind of like a sacred part of the bush near Kagbere and Masongbo, where spiritual activities occurred.



The Temple of the Universe

I became friends with a young woman named Shimra, who helped me to begin to understand what in the world this guy, Mickey, was talking about. She also taught me a basic meditation technique: observing — witnessing — the breath coming in and out.

It helped that Shimra was cute, so I enjoyed being with her. She too was very critical of Western consumerism and its impact on the world, so we had that in common as well.

After I heard Mickey several times, I asked to meet with him in person. We set a time, and Shimra drove me out to see him.

The meeting was at Mickey's business near the Temple. It was a two-floor, cement-block building that housed some type of software company. Computers were still new to me, and I was just getting used to WordPerfect. The idea of creating a software program was beyond my imagination.

Shimra and I were late for the meeting, and Mickey immediately pointed it out. I was invited into his office, surprised to see a large wooden desk with lots of papers. Somehow I had expected this yogi to be unconcerned with time and worldly matters. On the contrary, Mickey was punctual and businesslike.

Mickey asked what he could do for me. I told him I had returned from four years in Africa and was writing about the experience. As I started to describe some of the reverse culture shock images and the ball of balance, Mickey asked, "What do you think people in the United States and Africa are seeking?"

"I don't know; happiness," I replied.

"Yes," Mickey said, "happiness outside of themselves. Everyone is looking in the wrong place. There is a state that exists inside that will satisfy all desires."

This made no sense and I asked, "But how can you say that when thousands of children in Sierra Leone die before the age of five? What about this massive consumerism in the United States? It's clear it cannot be sustained and it is affecting the rest of the world."

Mickey looked straight at me and said, "Who asked you how it should be?"

I became animated, "But it's just wrong! Thousands and thousands of children dying and people in the U.S. spending millions and billions of dollars on things they don't need, sucking up the world's resources for pleasure."

"Who asked you how it should be?" Mickey continued.

I went off even further, talking about Goodwill clothes being dumped on the markets, about excess grain from the U.S. flooding Africa, about illegal trade of diamonds and corruption in Sierra Leone....

Mickey looked at me and said, "If the planet Pluto was orbiting in a way that you did not like, what are you going to do about it?"

That comment lost me all together, and I became frustrated.

Mickey went on, "Look, there are billions of stars and planets in the Milky Way. There are billions of galaxies, all with billions of stars and planets. Science is discovering more and more galaxies all the time. All of them are guided by some intelligence and by natural laws."

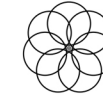
"All you have to do is turn to that intelligence and it will guide you. It may even take you back to Africa in ways that you never imagined. That intelligence is much more creative than what you can ever come up with on your own."

"Your preferences, your judgments, your likes and dislikes, and all of your beliefs about how the world should be — they only separate you from that very subtle state of consciousness that is in you, that is in everything and that is manifesting everything."

"That state of 'super consciousness' is behind your thoughts. When you tap into it, the bliss and the love will overwhelm you and you will feel a connection with everything in the universe. There is nothing, nothing in the world you would trade for it, not all the money in the world or all the rice in Africa. If you were in that state of bliss 24/7, you wouldn't care if you were sweeping floors. That state of consciousness is what you and everyone is seeking."

At that point, I was in way over my head, plus I was pissed, as I just did not understand what he was saying. I was still upset with the disparities between West Africa and the United States and not ready to move beyond what I thought was right for the world.

## Even Deeper Still ~ Massage School



Despite my resistance, Mickey sparked something, and I had no idea what it was. I kept going to the Temple on Sundays and became more restless as I listened, trying to understand. Meanwhile, it was clear that I was not going back to Sierra Leone anytime soon and that I needed to face the reality of staying in the States.

After several months of living with my brother's family, it was time to move out on my own. My judgments of Western lifestyles and confusion over reverse culture shock came across in moodiness and snide comments. It was much better to be on my own.

I found the bottom floor of a house to rent from a professor who taught cross-cultural and spiritual aspects of psychology. It was a nice match, as she, Mary, was open to my peculiar habits of relying primarily on a bicycle for getting around town and recycling almost everything. I would come back to the house with small pieces of wire, empty containers, and other items I found along the road.

Meanwhile, Shimra had introduced me to the Florida School of Massage. In discussing the ball of balance, she said they taught the same concept there. This at first confused me, so I went to visit the school. Sure enough, there were similarities, and I wanted to learn more. The school was known for its strong mind-body awareness approach and most instructors were either students or teachers of Vispassana meditation, as well as trained in Gestalt therapy.

I worked for several months painting houses and saved money to take a four-month massage certification program. Shimra also introduced me to Patrick, a Cornell University graduate who had entered massage school after the suicide of a close friend. Massage school was a way for him to heal. Patrick and I became close friends, and he moved into Mary's house with me.

Patrick got a kick out of the fact that he had dozens of kitchen utensils and I only had a Swiss army knife and two pots. I bought rice in twenty-pound bags and refused to plug in the refrigerator or accept free furniture. Being that Patrick was