

Pilgrimage

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I walked around the side of the mosque, but found nothing. I walked on around the next side, and the next. I began to think that my tour guide was sending me on a wild goose chase, when I finally saw it. There was a woman standing next to a big metal rack with black tents on hangers. I did not know what to say, but she spoke no English anyway. She looked me up and down and reached for the longest one she had. She helped me put on the tent dress and the head covering. Then she pointed to the side door. I walked into the women's quarters of the brand new State Mosque of Malaysia.

There were two women already in the little side women's room, facing into the vast open space. It was huge! I have been to stadiums and theaters in many cities, but this seemed bigger than anything I had ever seen. There were no pictures or altars. There was nothing to focus on. A few other women came in and whispered, then fell silent. I stood, not knowing what to do. More than that, I didn't even know why I was there.

For twelve years, I had been traveling the globe. I remember my first trip to India, going there to meet my Guru. It seemed impossible for a single mother in the 1970's, but it had happened! Then I spent years shuttling between what had become my two homelands. Both were strange in some ways, but familiar in others. I began visiting other countries on the way, both in the East and West. I shopped and toured in every country that the airplanes routed through, sometimes for only a day or two, sometimes for a week or a month. I filled up the pages in my passport and had to send it in to get more pages added.

Everywhere I went, I visited holy sites. I rubbed gold leaf on Buddha's belly in Thailand, burned incense in Chinese temples, and visited the great cathedrals in many countries of Europe. I sat zazen in a temple in Japan, attended mass in Goa, and offered flowers and coconuts in temples all over India.

I can see that I had been chasing God all my life. I first found the experience in nature, beginning when I was a kid at summer camp. The YMCA camp I went to every year had a lookout point, an incredible view where silence was observed. I spent more time there than in the canoes, arts and crafts and horseback riding combined. When I got old enough to choose where I wanted to go, summer vacations were spent in tents in the Sequoias, taking in the majesty of trees that were alive at the time of Jesus and Buddha. Niagara Falls overwhelmed me with a surge of joy so great that I couldn't contain it. I ultimately had to surrender — to both the sound and sight of all that water surging over the rim! I spent three days on Mt. Shasta, an incredibly trippy place.

My pilgrimages have taken me to holy places carved out by nature as well as places built by humankind. The one that stands out most boldly in my memory is the day my knees buckled as I climbed twenty stairsteps to the room in which my Guru's Guru had taken Mahasamadhi (left his body). Though my visit was sixteen years after the auspicious event, the energy in that room thrust me into a three-hour meditation. It changed something so deep in me that there are still no words for it, even though it is more than twenty years later. This room that he used as the stage for his exit from this world was in a small town that had grown up around him. In America, towns grow up around shopping malls and stadiums. In India, towns grow around enlightened beings.

Now I stood in a mosque. I felt like I did not have a clue what it was about. Slowly, the space in the room took on a different quality for me. Instead of looking at the walls, I began to see the space between the walls. I realized that space was filled with a presence I had been searching for in every holy site I had ever visited. In that moment my search came to an end, as I realized the thread of pilgrimage throughout my life. I found God in a mosque, just as I had in nature and in the churches and temples everywhere.

Shri Ramakrishna practiced all the religions and then said that God is found in every one. I confess that I did not put forth that much effort — I visited rather than practiced them all, but I found that One Reality in every place. Now I don't feel the need to travel any more, because all those pilgrimages have given me something that is not dependent on a location. It is everywhere and also here, all at the same time. But I could not have found it without going to all those places. I highly recommend pilgrimage!

In fact, someone recently showed me a photo of the murthi (enlivened statue) of Vitthala in the temple at Pandharpur and chills ran up my spine. Maybe I could actually get to Pandharpur some time soon. Of course, the mouth of the River Ganga is such an auspicious site. There is an ashram (residential yoga center) there I have always wanted to visit. Swami Subramunium is building a Shiva temple on Kauai and has an incredible crystal lingam to install. And, I hear the temple at Alandi is incredible. Jnaneshwar Maharaj took live Mahasamadhi there over eight hundred years ago, and his presence is still so strong that . . .

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