

Katy Lehman
Pennsylvania State University
English 202
December 7, 2018

This memoir takes place January of 2018. I, alone, right before my twenty-first birthday, traveled to Chennai, India with a group of women to complete my Yoga Teacher Training. The journey, as you will learn, was extremely influential not only on my yoga practice and my ability to teach others, but on my personal growth as a young adult. The story consists of three pivotal moments on the trip that had a significant impact in showing myself that I have the power to grow through yoga practice and traveling to a culturally rich and new place in the world.

Sun Salutations

My eyes fluttered open. I scrambled to turn off my phone alarm. It was 5 o'clock in the morning. I flickered on the dimmest light and saw my 59 year old roommate, Carol, sluggishly getting herself up, mumbling and muttering curse words about how early it was. I made my way to the bathroom, grabbed a water bottle and poured a tiny dribble of store-bought, room temperature, filtered water onto my toothbrush. Carol shooed me out of the bathroom, so I made my way over to my suitcase.

"Which striking silk three-piece outfit do I want to wear for my first day?" I asked myself. The night before, we arrived in Chennai, India and went to a classic Indian garment shop to pick out proper clothing to wear on our trip. The shop was filled floor to ceiling with an endless supply of traditional Indian attire. Silk garments that flowed and draped on the body like the delicate a silk robe people wear in movies. I chose the red, blue, and white floral ensemble with the embellishment around the neck. The top was short sleeve, but covered my shoulders and went up to my neckline. The overlay silk top was very long and went down to my mid-thigh but had slits on the sides. The matching pants were extremely loose and had a very saggy crotch. But the outfit was completed with a gorgeous silk scarf that I repeatedly wrapped around my neck and head to find the most realistic, but fashionable way to wear the piece. I slipped on the extremely comfortable and not-so-fashionable sandals my mother gave me. She refers to them as her long-walks and gardening sandals. I rummaged through my suitcase for my bag with the sunscreen, malaria pills, and precautionary diarrhea pills.

"Come on ladies it's time to head to the beach for Sun Salutations," I heard Erica call to Carol and I from the hallway. Carol muttered more curse words and I pranced out the door with clammy skin, a youthful smile across my cheeks, and bags under my eyes. I had my yoga mat and journal in hand. It was 5:15 in the morning and I was on the opposite side of the world. This was my first time leaving the country, minus a handful of trips to resorts in Mexico with my family. I felt like a naïve tourist.

An article in Journal of Travel Research by Kenneth F. Hyde and Rob Lawson (2003), "The Nature of Independent Travel," explains the tourism phenomenon. The tourism phenomenon proposes that travel, especially independent travel, gives people the ability to experience independence and freedom that is different from their everyday lives. Another word to describe the tourism phenomenon is wanderlust. Hyde and

Lawson (2003) describe wanderlust “as a basic trait of some individuals that causes them to leave familiar things behind and seek out exciting new places and new cultures” (p.14). Curiosity leads many people to travel to new places and embrace exploration. Hyde and Lawson (2003) write about the ““Ulysses factor,” which is a basic motivation of some tourists to explore, a curiosity for new places and people” and they describe the characteristics of an independent traveler, saying, “he is not looking for anything in particular and is not greatly concerned with what he discovers...it is in this sense that he is a true explorer” (p.20). We are all seeking a new experience different than our habitual lifestyles. Stepping outside of the norm and entering the world of exploration makes us vulnerable to the unknown even if we do not know or believe this. Travel is full of new and unique experiences, whether it is new food, nature, people, religion, art, architecture, or animals. In an article “Impact of Extraversion and Sensation Seeking On International Tourism Choices” the authors Cheng-Yu Li and Bi-Kun Tsai (2013) propose that people with international tourism experience will tend to have higher levels of extraversion and sensation seeking. When we step outside of their comfort zone, we make a conscious effort to open our eyes to new possibilities and opportunities that will help us mature.

“Good morning my dear Katy, are you ready for the day ahead of us?” Erica sweetly asked me. Erica is a 50-year-old woman who I had been blessed to know for three years. She is the owner of a small yoga studio in my University’s downtown. Exactly four months before this day I began my yoga teacher training with her and eight other women. We spent an extensive amount of time, 200 hours to be exact, practicing physical yoga and learning the yoga philosophy. She had become a second mother to me, and someone I strived to impress and please. She has dark skin, a thin muscular body, thick black hair, and a smile that can be seen from a mile away. She dresses like a 26-year-old going to a bohemian yoga studio in Boulder, Colorado...maybe because she previously owned one there several decades ago.

“I cannot wait!” I exclaimed to Erica as the eight other women looked at me with confusion as to how I had so much energy that early in the morning. Ten women dressed head-to-toe in colorful, embellished, loose silk garments began walking over to the main road. The sun had yet to rise, but faint lights from random buildings and auto rickshaw taxis guided us to the main street. Smells of homeless people and stray animals filled the air, mixed with the potent stench of sewage water. It was not going to be a lavish trip.

“Honk honk,” “Beep beep,” “Toot toot”. Yellow vehicles that looked like rundown hybrids between taxis and mopeds swarmed the streets. Erica waved down three auto rickshaw taxis and we climbed into the rickety seats. We zoomed through the streets and I quickly realized that Chennai does not have any traffic laws, at all. I felt like I was in a video game. I was cracking up. There was a smile from ear to ear across my face. We zoomed around the streets and I observed all of the absurd sites around me at 5:20

in the morning. There were families of 4, 5, even 6 people all riding on one moped. I even saw young boys walking cows on leashes.

The auto rickshaw came to an abrupt stop and we scurried out. As the sky slowly brightened, we made our way over to the center of the Marina that overlooked the beach. I was shocked at the amount of homeless people, stray dogs, and trash around me. But I was also in awe of the amount of local Indian's who were out and about at the crack of dawn with us. The Marina was filled with people of all ages getting in their morning exercise or meeting up with family and friends to begin their day with a chat or a stroll.

We found a large spot on the Marina next to a diverse group of Indians practicing yoga.

"This group has been meeting here in the exact same spot every morning for decades" Erica told us as multiple older aged men and women waved to Erica with huge grins on their faces.

"Erica! You have brought another group of your students! It is so nice to see you again!" They exclaimed to her, clearly overjoyed with Erica's presence and that we would be practicing sunrise Sun Salutations with them for the next two weeks.

We laid down our mats and with Erica's guidance we began our Sun Salutation practice. Sun Salutations is practiced by yogis around the world as a tribute to the energy from the sun. The asana sequence Surya Namaskar, comes from the roots surya, the sun, and namas, to bow or adore. Richard Rosen writes in his article "Here Comes the Sun: The Tradition of Surya Namaskar", published by the highly reputable Yoga Journal, that since the sequence is "a humble adoration of the light and insight of the self, it's essential to practice Sun Salutation in a spirit of devotion and with your awareness turned always inward toward the heart" (2007). The routine flows through several different asanas, yogic postures or movements, on the left and right side of the body for most commonly 12 rounds. Traditionally, the sequence is "performed outdoors, facing east-the location of the rising sun, a symbol of the dawn of consciousness and jnana", or higher wisdom (2007). The asana sequence in combination with conscious breathing energizes and cleanses the body and mind of the yogi, ultimately creating a moving meditation.

During my practice I usually tend to keep my eyes closed and focus on the way my breath flows and my body feels, but this morning I could not help but look at all the incredible sights around me. I watched the locals practicing next to me. I watched the round orange sun rising up ahead over the horizon and creating vivid, glorious colors across the sky. I watched the stray dogs chasing each other on the beach. I watched the pride and joy that was displayed on Erica's face.

I watched myself practice, I allowed my body, breath, and mind to unify and transcend. I allowed myself to go deep into my practice and move away from just the physical exercise, but enter into spiritual, mental, and emotional energies. My breath and my body connected. I allowed my breath to guide the movements of my body. In this moment I did not have to think about how flexible my hips felt, if I had enough strength in my arms, or if I had enough balance in my legs. My yoga practice felt like a dance, a dance that I had finally mastered and could naturally move to the rhythm of the music. My thoughts were silenced and I allowed myself to be present. In yoga practice, the physical aspects of yoga come second to attitude and mindset. Having a present mind and open heart allows the practitioner to expand and deepen their sense of unity within the body and live in the moment.

As I performed the Sun Salutations I took in the *Prana Shakti*, the life energy that the first rays of the morning sun were shining down on me. I cultivated not only the sun's energy, but also the energy from the atmosphere of the Marina in Chennai, India at 6:00 am my first morning in Chennai. I felt myself opening my eyes to the opportunities of India. I felt myself growing as a yogi.

Krishnanacharya Yoga Mandiram

Walking through the streets of Chennai I could explicitly see the differences in class from street to street. Some streets were dirty and smelly with stray animals roaming and children playing with sticks and rocks outside of their family's shops. People rode past me on their scooters carrying absurd items like 10-foot tall poles and toilet bowls. But as we continued walking, the shops and homes became nicer.

We walked down a flourishing, charming street, with a large school on the right. The walls of the school were white and every window was surrounded with a light blue and orange frame. Young boys and girls in school uniforms scurried around. The homes looked like they were picked out of a street in Beverly Hills. And on this street was the Krishnanacharya Yoga Mandiram, one of Chennai's most well-known yoga landmarks and a premiere center of yoga and yoga therapy in India.

"Welcome to KYM, please leave your shoes in the shelves outside and speak quietly when you enter. Your first session is on the third floor," a young woman dressed in elegant silk clothes and beads wrapped around her neck, wrists, and ankles told us as we entered through the gates of the entry way garden. The sleek, tall building was the nicest building I had seen so far in Chennai. The garden was filled with an exquisite array of flowers, trees, statues, and a stone path that led to a gazebo on the far side. I wanted to explore, but followed Erica and the other women up to the specified room on the third floor. The walls in the building were bare, but it was cool and clean (two words uncommonly used to describe the places I had experienced thus far in Chennai).

I walked into a large room surrounded by windows and overlooking tall, exotic trees and the private school across the street. I heard birds chirping, children playing, and the nature blowing in the wind. Colorful yoga mats covered the floor. I could not think of a more ideal place to practice yoga.

A fit, put together gentleman walked in, introduced himself, and immediately began conducting us through a yoga routine. He was tall, dark skinned, clean cut, and extremely handsome. I could feel the other women giving him the same lookdown as he began bending his body into downward dog and the warrior series.

Jon Kabat-Zinn writes in his book, "Suffice it to say that yoga is one of the great gifts on the planet, and availing yourself of it and bringing mindfulness to your body and mind through the gateways of yoga asanas and the flowing sequences of various postures can be extraordinarily uplifting, rejuvenating, invigorating, transporting, and just plain relaxing. You can think of yoga as a full-bodied, three-hundred-and-sixty-degree musculo-skeletal conditioning that naturally leads to greater strength, balance, and flexibility as you practice. It is a profound meditation practice, especially when practiced mindfully, and develops strength, balance, and flexibility of mind even as it is developing those same capacities at the level of the body. It is also a great doorway into stillness, into the rich complexity of the body and its potential for healing, and, as with any other meditative practice, a perfect platform for choiceless awareness" (2017).

In yoga, "there are said to be over 84,000 primary postures, and with at least ten possible variations for each one, that makes for over 840,000 yoga postures, which means a virtually infinite number of ways of combining and sequencing them" (2017). Therefore, every yoga practice is open to being different and unique with room for exploration. In addition to physical postures, breathing is an essential part of yoga practice. The quality and depth of inhales and exhales as you move through different asanas and vinyasas allows for the practitioner to connect the body and the breath. Doing so results in a more mindful experience.

This one-hour session was only the first of six throughout the day. In between each session we drank piping hot masala chai tea and chattered about anything other than yoga. The warm, flavorful drink slid down my throat and warmed my body, exactly the liquid encouragement I needed to get through the long, information-packed day. From asana practice, to pranayama, to meditation, to yoga philosophy, my mind and body whispered,

"Eat, sleep, yoga, repeat, eat, sleep, yoga, repeat." As I sat there diligently listening and taking in the insightful information that these well renowned yogis shared with us, I couldn't help but wonder how I would possibly remember all of the information.

“I am only 20 years old, who will take me seriously when I teach a yoga class? How will I possibly remember all of the yogic philosophy and asana?” I thought to myself throughout the next six days at the Yoga Mandiram.

Throughout our Yoga Teacher Training, Erica spoke frequently about the importance of confidence. I always believed I was a confident woman. I was someone who knew my strengths and was good at hiding my weaknesses. During one session at KYM, we all sat on thin floor pillows listening to an alluring woman in her fifties, with a blend of a British and an Indian accent, speak to us about how to be a proper yoga teacher. She spoke with grace, intelligence, and experience.

“Teaching goes way beyond your ability to practice. Teaching goes way beyond your knowledge of Sanskrit words, asana, pranayama, and philosophy. Teaching is your ability to listen to your students, to read what they need, and tailor your teaching to best suite the individual,” she spoke with a soft intelligence. In that moment, my fears of remembering the countless information or proving myself as a young teacher fluttered away. It was selfish and ignorant to look at myself as a yoga teacher and worry that I was not confident or smart enough. My job as a teacher is to learn how to read others and tailor my teaching to fit the needs of my practitioners.

In that moment, I began to realize something crucial about myself. I realized that I have a strong desire to heal. To make a conscious effort to surrender myself to my yoga practice and use my knowledge to heal others in their practice. In my eyes, to heal is to improve, to rejuvenate, and to relieve.

The Yoga Mandiram was more than a place to study asana poses, learn Sanskrit words, or dissect yogic textbooks, history, philosophy, and traditions. The Yoga Mandiram was opening my eyes to not just the yogi I strived to become, but also the individual I wanted to be in this large world. I saw myself as more than just the young American girl who traveled across the world for a yoga retreat.

Arunchala Hill

We spent eight hours in a crammed bus that looked like a retro disco group’s tour bus with colorful lights and music blaring from its speakers. After six days at the Yoga Mandiram, our next four days were going to be in Tiruvannamalai, a Hindu pilgrimage town in Southern India.

Tiruvannamalai was different than Chennai. The town looked more like one huge market street than a city. Hundreds of locals lined the sides of the road with their small rickety stands selling homemade jewelry, clothing, baskets, fruits, vegetables, and more. There were more trees, monkeys and dirt paths. The homes were every color of the rainbow and the streets were filled with chalk art in the shapes of different mandalas.

In addition to the authentic Indian feel that the small city presented, we came to Tiruvannamalai to climb the sacred Arunchala Hill.

In Norman's thesis (2004) he tells the story of a woman Sarah Macdonald, whose book *Holy Cow* tells her story of a "wild journey of discovery through India in search of the meaning of life and death [and where she] faces serious questions about her mortality and what she feels is her own inner spiritual void" (p.25). Macdonald explains how leaving the job she adored was the hardest thing she ever did but she needed to do so in order to travel to be able to reclaim herself and redefine her identity. Throughout her journey in India, Macdonald embraced the religion and culture that surrounded her. She describes Buddhism, saying that it is "a good faith for those [who are] oriented to individualism as it offers a spiritual psychology of self-development...and its central tenet is the one thing rich western kids can't buy- happiness" (Norman, 2004, p.32). Although Buddhism is not her primary religion, she opened her eyes and spirit to learning about the unfamiliar religion and culture during her travels. Through this exploration she gained not only knowledge on the history, rituals, and rules of the religion, but she also learned about herself in the process. She realized that this culture and religion in particular helps a person gain self-development and happiness. Throughout her travels, Macdonald "continue[d] to explore the faiths and practices she encounter[ed] in India, either going on retreats or attending healing sessions, or simply observing the practices of others" (Norman, 2004, p.32). Individuals who enter a new country or foreign place have the option of participating in the cliché tourist attractions or immersing themselves in the culture to gain a significantly deeper experience. There is often conflict caused by a lack of or mis-understanding of cultural differences; however, people will benefit greatly from participating in the normal activities that a culture or religion partakes in daily. These persons will find ways to compromise, appreciate, and work towards peaceful encounters between different cultures and religions. In doing so these individuals will learn about the new culture and, possibly more importantly, themselves. Macdonald explains how she realized that she does not have to be "a Christian who follows the church, or a Buddhist nun in robes, or a convert to Judaism or Islam or Sikhism, [but she] can be a believer in something bigger than what [she] can touch [and she] can make a leap of faith to a higher power in a way that's appropriate to [her] culture but not be imprisoned by it" (Norman, 2004, p.32). When an individual takes the time to expand his or her knowledge of other places, people, cultures, or religions through experience, it will reveal more about said individual and their own culture. By observing and participating in other cultures, an individual will have the ability to assess the good and bad of this culture and their own. Then they will be able to formulate their own opinion about this culture in comparison to their own; moreover, they will decide to not take their own country for granted or discover that they prefer another place's ideals more. After opening her eyes to new cultures, Macdonald believes to be "reborn as a better person, less reliant on others for [her] happiness and full of desire to replace anger with love" (Norman, 2004, p.32). Her

travels allowed her to make a personal decision about where she comes from, where she has travelled to and who she wants to be as a person.

I woke up early before my alarm went off. I was either getting extremely used to the early mornings or my body was naturally so excited for the day that it could not sleep any longer. I put on my mother's *long-walks and gardening* sandals, comfortable baggy pants, and a loose tank top. This was the first day in India that I was allowed to show my shoulders. I decided to leave my beautiful silk scarves at home...they wouldn't feel so beautiful on my body while walking up a steep mountain in 90-degree heat.

I walked outside onto the small patio attached to my room. Through the buildings and trees I could see the very top of the Arunchala Hill. I felt excited, blessed, and anxious. I was ready for some exercise other than yoga practice.

We walked through the streets, passing bright yellow, pink, orange, and green homes. Monkeys ran across wires above us. Dogs scurried past us sniffing for food. Locals stepped out of their front doors to stare at us or give a friendly wave. We looked different, but at this point in the trip I felt connected to the town, the people, the culture. The gravel path surrounded by homes turned into a steep dirt and stone path surrounded by trees and nature. My nostrils craved the fresh oxygenated air after being surrounded by the constant smells of pollution and sewage water.

The hike was rocky and steep at points, but I enjoyed the challenge.

At several points along the walk we stopped and spoke to young gentlemen selling hand-made trinkets and carvings. Erica even recognized and introduced us to a gentleman and his sons that she had met several times climbing the mountain in years past. Travel encourages new social interactions and enlightening relationships. When people travel, whether it is alone or with others, they will encounter new people along the trip who are inevitably different than them. An individual will encounter other world travelers and natives of the place he or she travels to. All of these persons have a different past, purpose, goal, religion, culture, and lifestyle; therefore, they are all full of different knowledge and perspectives. Sarah Macdonald explains how in her journeys throughout India she "experienced the most profound feelings of devotion and piety, but as an observer [of Buddhism], not a believer, because she cannot accept the ideas of karma and rebirth, but it would be a great help [if she] could spend some time with the monks, to experience the monastic life, to get a clearer idea of Buddhism, and to find out whether [she] could reach the deep emotion and sense of belonging [she] so longed for" (Norman, 2004, p.28). Macdonald acknowledges that she will never convert to the new religion, but she wants to practice Buddhism to create a relationship with the people who do believe and to learn from the monk leaders. These social interactions and relationships will have a profound effect on the overall travel experience, but also open a person's eyes to the lifestyle and opinions of a stranger.

I was in awe of these *mountain people* who spend everyday tending to the mountain, walking up and down without shoes, and others selling the artwork they made with their bare hands.

“We have arrived at the sacred caves,” I heard Erica tell the group as I was lost in thought observing nature and the depths of my mind.

Up ahead were large rock caves surrounded by a naturally lavish garden. It was obvious that this portion of the hill was the entire city’s pride and joy. They strive to keep this sacred space beautiful, respected, and nurtured.

I slowly walked through the garden, taking in the flowers, the vines, the trees. I watched monkeys scurry above and around me. I heard birds chirping and people whispering mantras, prayers, and chants.

I walked into the cave. It was dim and cool. I found a spot on the ground near the Hindu alter. My thoughts wondered. I wanted to make this moment special. I began to focus on my breath. I closed my eyes, and adjusted my posture to feel strong, rooted, and comfortable. As I inhaled and exhaled I searched my thoughts for an intention or a mantra to repeat to myself.

“What have you learned this week, Katy?” I asked myself.

“Who is the woman you want to or have become?” I went deeper. I continued to focus on my breath and did not allow my thoughts to wonder in a million different directions, but I was still unable to find a true meditative intention.

Dhyana, or meditaion and mindfulness, has been practiced by yogis for millennia. Andrew Tilin writes in *Yoga Journal*, “Research shows that meditating can reduce stress, alleviate anxiety and depression, increase your attention span, and deepen your compassion for others, among its many other benefits. We now know that regular meditation can change the physical structure of the brain, and recent studies by scientists at the University of Wisconsin and UCLA suggest not only that meditation might make your brain better at cognitive functions such as processing information and forming memories, but also that the more years you regularly meditate, the greater the potential benefits. From the Dalai Lama to Oprah and from cell phone apps that prompt you to look inward to worldwide flash-mob meditations that aim to publicize the benefits of the practice, meditation is heralded by secular, spiritual, and scientific communities alike as unimpeachably good for you” (2012).

I decided to exit the cave and continued to walk through the beautiful garden at the top of this mountain.

Erica was sitting alone on a rock. I walked over to her and silently sat down. We looked at each other and smiled, but did not speak. I could feel her energy radiating. She was honored to share this special place with me.

After many moments of stillness, she turned to me and took my wrist. In her hand was a simple, red string. She began wrapping the string multiple times around my wrist.

“This is your devotional string. Every time you look down at your wrist you will be reminded of your importance. You will be reminded of who you are. You will be reminded of what you stand for. Every time you look at the red string you will be full of self-love and remember your devotion to yourself. Keep this string on your wrist until it falls off naturally. And when that day comes, look back on the time from now until then and be proud of the individual you are and continue to be” Erica spoke with poise and beauty.

I looked at her and smiled. She wrapped her arms around me and we embraced one another like two sisters or dear friends filled with love and pride for one another.

In that moment I was no longer Erica’s student. In that moment I was filled with pride for myself. I was proud of what I had accomplished over the past four months in my Yoga Teacher Training. But more importantly, I was proud of the woman I had transformed into. I was intelligent and I was confident. I had the intelligence to teach others. I knew I was able to share the knowledge I had acquired with others. I had the confidence that made me able to heal others.

My journey to India began as a trip to expand my knowledge of yoga and deepen my own practice. This awe-inspiring journey was more than just the culmination of my teacher training. I saw a part of the world very different from my own culture. My eyes opened to the different childhoods, lifestyles, and traditions of others. My mind opened to my ability to heal and teach through yoga.

Works Cited

Hyde, K. F., Lawson, R. (2003). The nature of independent travel. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 42, 13-23.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2017). Mindfulness. *Springer link*. Vol. 8: 517-519.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0695-0>

Li, C.-Y., Tsai, B.-K. (2013). Impact of extraversion and sensation seeking on international tourism choices. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2, 327+.
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A333842518/OVIC?u=psucic&sid=OVIC&xid=9dbd2dd4>

Norman, A. (2004). Spiritual tourism: religion and spirituality in contemporary travel. *University of Sydney*. 1-58.
<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/6150/1/THESIS%20-%20Final.pdf>

Rosen, R. (2007). Here comes the sun: the tradition of surya namaskar. *Yoga Journal*.
<https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/here-comes-the-sun>

Tilin, A. (2012). Daily meditation made easy. *Yoga Journal*.
<https://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/everybody-s-meditating>