

Ben Viatte

..two little
wandering monks

an inner journey



...through Northern India without money or transport



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an inner journey

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Foreword

To you, what makes happiness? A fine balance between material comfort, physical health, financial stability, political safety, family life, and livelihood all carefully equalized on God's turntable?

A simple yet timeless question that Yi and Ben naively set out to answer as they left their homes in the Indian Himalayas with exactly... none of those things.

No money or bank card, no phone and not much at all really, other than a tarp to sleep under, a set of orange robes, and the stubborn determination to make it entirely on foot to the world's largest Hindu gathering, 500 km away: the Kumbha Mela.

Enough with the rambling, let's get to the story.



Part I

A Dive into the Unknown

अनजानी गहराई

Day 0

February 24th 2021

It started as a life experiment: a firm decision to shatter our daily routines along with all the safety, comfort, habits, attachment, addictions, and false ideas of predictability that came with it.

This was day 0 of a 2-month *Sadhana*, a spiritual undertaking, that would bring us on foot from our homes in Dharamshala, Northern India, to the holy city of Haridwar 500 kilometers further. More specifically, to Kumbha Mela, the largest Hindu gathering in the world, reuniting its most revered Babas, Gurus, and Sadhus from all different schools of Hinduism, to exchange their teachings, their practices, their yogas, their presence, their meditation. A melting pot of Indian spirituality where the wildest Naga Sadhus, entirely naked and covered in ashes, would wave their tridents at the sky crying out names of Shiva, and the

calmest Muni Babas, who haven't spoken a word in decades, would sit all day in utmost stillness, contemplating the world as it goes by. These could be found, and everything in between.

But for Yi and I, the destination wasn't any more important than the walk there, the pilgrimage: a test in our faith, our trust in karma. We were leaving home without phone, money, any kind of bank card, plan B, backup, safety net, nothing in case something went wrong. Instead, our survival would depend on people's kindness, the world's alignment, countless external conditions that I believe are governed by our own inner state of mind. Let's put this belief to the test - an exercise in manifestation. Let's meditate and manifest whatever we're in need of and see if it works. If it doesn't, let's embrace the hardship, let's embrace what doesn't work and see it as a guide, see where it takes us. If we stay in pure awareness, nothing can go wrong because wrong becomes right.

Did I mention who was Yi?

Anyway we were initially meant to be a group of six: three Indian friends of mine from Haryana and Bombay, and three foreigners: China, Poland, Switzerland. That was me. But as usual for this kind of irrational endeavor, completely opposite to our everyday lives, D-day would come looming and dreams would start to back away. The gap would widen between an idyllic adventure in our minds and the hard reality of the roughness ahead. We all love *The Lord of the Rings*, but at the end of the day no one knows how Frodo took a shower.

Roughness comes with beauty and inner transformation, but for sure we'd be spending nights shivering in the rain, or cursing mosquitoes, or hating the traffic or roadside dust, or hiding like fugitives... thirst, hunger, exhaustion... lack of any kind of comfort we're used to like running water, clean clothes, electricity, lights, set meal times or medical

care... and a load of other things that make a definite part of such a journey.

But that's why I love it, that's why we love it, and we turned out to be just Yi and I, the original two, whose stubborn motivation had endured until D-day minus one, the last day of preparation.

Preparation meant all kinds of things, more than we could imagine for an experience that had simplicity at its root. By simplicity, I guess I mean having one simple bag. Whatever objects we wanted to survive with had to fit inside, or else be thrown out. You can imagine we chose carefully - it took five days! Three were dedicated to sewing: we liked the ancient Buddhist tradition of putting together your clothing by hand. It was a meditative way to ponder on the trip, individually as we sewed in silence, contemplating... or together as we shared our thoughts and roasted almonds.

Topics ranged from mundane comments like "We'll probably lose weight during the trip, so

let's sew our pants' waistline smaller" to deep moral questions about which rules we would set on ourselves. "During the walk, let's make it a point to follow noble speech. No chit-chat. Only saying what's necessary." or "Let's keep in mind that we're not doing this trip as a couple, but as a Sangha: as fellow Sadhus on the path of Dharma."

Now let's have a short break with a few words on Indian terminology: Sangha and Dharma are age-old concepts in India's various religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, which very nicely remind us they all have the same root. *Sangha* means the family of practitioners: fellow friends, brothers and sisters together on the path.

What path? That's *Dharma*, the path of peace, the path of awareness, the path of love, the path of liberation from ego and negativity, liberation from suffering.

During our days of preparation, mental as well as material, to bring or not to bring the phone

was another hot topic. It's become such a core part of today's society, without it you're hardly considered human. You can't get anything done! I haven't been to the west in a while, but in India nowadays the first questions on any kind of document are *First name, last name, phone number, prove it! (by writing the OTP below)*.

I was hesitant, but Yi was clear. She wouldn't bring it. Finally I complied and loved the boldness. "When you have nothing, magic happens" she would say. Let's withdraw from society like real hermits, let's be like Buddha's first wandering monks. Falling asleep with dusk instead of WhatsApp. Waking up with dawn instead of that iPhone chime.

No way to see at night other than flame, no means to know the time other than the sun, or the moon and stars if we're really good. Clocklessness... a dream of mine since childhood, but for some reason I never spent a single day in my life without knowing the time. Have you?

All that to say, a lot came out after eighteen hours of sewing together: I saw it as a stage one of patience practice. A small mental test before the actual walk, which would take a far far greater deal of patience.

On top of the sewing, two days were also spent gathering things, comparing weight, volume, attach points, ropes, carabiners... printing maps, calculating distances, and tracing our chosen route... writing phone numbers and addresses on pen and paper in case hell breaks loose, and saying goodbye to loved ones across the world with our small expensive handheld touch devices that we were about to abandon for two months.

Day 1

February 25th

The physical act of putting on our newly-made brown-orange robes had a greater impact on my mind than I would have imagined. This was actually stepping into monkhood. I had never done that before. A self-proclaimed kind of monk with obstinate determination, that didn't care too much about formal initiation by some higher authority.

After all, initiated or not... one's personal determination, that's what counts, right? No one's going to walk the path for us. So being self-proclaimed didn't feel lacking in any way. Did you know the Buddha himself was self-proclaimed? He daringly fled his princely life in the palace, rocked up in the middle of the woods with his horse, slashed his hair off with a sword, gave up his belongings and put on monk's clothing.

I didn't have a sword or a horse, but the feeling was noble for sure: shedding my old skin, starting a new life that nothing from the past had the right to obstruct. It felt amazing, I felt reborn.

For us, putting on the robes was followed by a short prayer. "Here we are, Sadhus - wandering hermits. Here I am a monk, here you are a nun. May everything that follows be in the name of awareness, may everything that follows be in the name of truth."

Thus started our day. We were then invited by the neighbor Amit for tea and fried bread, our first offerings as monks. Next came fruits from our other neighbor Barbara, as well as her hand-written numbers to call in case of emergency. She was our rock. Then, a one-kilogram solid ball of Tsampa - Tibetan roasted barley dough - that packed so much energy it promised to last several days. It happens to also be what the Tibetans take with them to cross the mountains since ancient times.

In our new attire, we decided to leave by the main town instead of the forestry path, and were really seen off like family. The first steps out of town were memorable.

After a few hours of getting the hang of our new status, the world started flowing around us with ease. People's smiles, food invitations, cheery *Hari Om*'s, and *chai* - slightly spiced Indian milk tea, made for a really warm first experience. The funny idea of a Sadhu couple didn't seem to bother anyone either. When people asked "Who is the girl? Wife? Sister? Girlfriend? *Other*?" I would simply answer we're fellow *Sanyasins* - renunciates, on the path of Dharma.

A few words of clarification before we get lost: *Sadhu* is a Hindi term literally translated as *monk*. But for words of such cultural significance, no literal translation can be deemed accurate. For us in the west, a monk is a quiet man in a church with clean black robes who conducts Sunday Mass by giving talks on Christ. But a Sadhu can be naked. A Sadhu can

live in a cave or sleep in the streets. A Sadhu can appear civilized or completely insane. The only thing that matters is his purpose: a life dedicated to something inside rather than something outside. We may call it spirituality, God, religion, or meditation. But let's not get stuck on terms.

I could feel a genuine innate sense of respect from the Indian people towards our characters as Sadhus, and this became tangibly apparent when we happened to cross a military ground, so large it took us thirty minutes to go from one end to the other. We would expect suspicion from such a place had we been dressed as ordinary tourists: what would a tourist be doing walking around here? But as Sadhus, we are given the warmest smiles and cordial greetings from officers near and far.

At some point later while sitting on a dusty ledge, we were approached by a slightly handicapped man begging for money. The only amount I had on me was 5 rupees from coins

that I had found on the ground. That means less than one tenth of a dollar... By fairness, I tried to give him three, keeping two for myself. "*More than half of my stash, that's how generous I am!*" I laughed to myself. His reaction was funny as well, as he seemed to realize we were even poorer than he was. He told me to keep my 3 rupees and left, a bit disappointed.

The first night's sleep was nothing short of miraculous - a smooth-stone river paradise with perfect privacy, a nearly full moon, a clearwater pool to jump in, and a clean flat rock large enough to sleep on top of in total comfort.

Day 2

February 26th

We started the day with Yoga and Taichi on the giant rocks before folding our blankets and making our way up to the road. As I focused on my posture, a thought crossed my mind... *"Think of how the Buddha walks. Not even touching the ground, floating... When we float in awareness, miracles happen."* Within ten seconds of that thought, a roadside coconut vendor, in humble silence, gestured us to sit on the bench by his stall. Still without a word, he offered us a coconut each. After a few meditative sips on the coconut juice, I couldn't help but break the silence. We had a pleasant conversation, but I do wonder what kind of experience it would be to have the whole thing in meditative silence instead of just a few minutes...

Finally, we were offered two more coconuts, and he saw us off by touching my knees in *Namaste* - a respectful greeting done with joined palms,

then doing the same for Yi, but touching her feet instead! The lower a Hindu touches, the lower he places himself and the more honor is shown. Later on, Yi and I laughed at how she got a higher rank than I did.

A few hours and several invitations for chai later, we were sitting around a table when an Indian Sadhu, dressed in orange and barefoot, approached us and talked to our host who had just invited us for chai. I had a hard time making out the conversation in fast Hindi, but it seems our host was belittling the Indian Sadhu and questioning his lifestyle. Whereas Yi and I got immediate invites for chai, he had to insist for 10 minutes... I was astonished to see how us, new kids on the block, 2-day old Sadhu foreigners, got more respect than this long-term local ascetic...

Today was our first *Bhiksha* experience - receiving alms as Sadhus. Upon Yi's suggestion we sat in the shade on the dusty cement ledge of a closed shop, she put her almsbowl ahead of

us, and we sat there eating leftovers of the barley dough we had been given the previous day.

Even in a small village, we immediately attracted people's attention and a group quickly formed around us. We were given a great deal of respect, 300 rupees of cash (a whole day's salary here) and a bag of food. As the group dissolved I could hear them utter "Shiva and Parvati..." Being compared with the most revered deities in the country touched me deeply and showed how the people respected our lifestyle.

As the evening drew in, our attention turned to a wedding-like event up a hill near the road. "Let's invite ourselves for food!" Yi said jokingly but meaning it. Like cheeky children we did just that, but somehow we were greatly appreciated at the event. They offered snacks, dinner, drinks, sweets, and even a place to stay in the home of the *Pandit's* family - the man

conducting the ceremony and its religious matters.

Day 3

February 27th

Without a clock, it becomes quite a bit harder to organize your day efficiently, especially in terms of waking up early: you have to rely on your inner clock instead. So we got up and did our Yoga with sunrise, after which we skipped socializing and invites for breakfast by the family, trying to save time. Despite that, we came to realize it was 9 o'clock at the start of our walk. How embarrassing...

A few hours later we were invited by a local group of woodworking women. Our bags still full of food from yesterday's offerings, we were once again showered in gifts which included fruits, money, and a heavenly glass of thick, oily cardamom milk, courtesy of their cow.

We also shared some words on meditation and Yoga, how to calm the mind, how to remove back pain. Day by day and without meaning to, it felt like we were coming to fulfill the role of

monks and nuns as defined by Indian society, what they're meant to give back. It felt really good.

A few hours went by, and Yi stopped to sit down. "Ben, are you feeling high?" she asked me unexpectedly.

Actually, I had been in a very meditative state since morning. Making our way through magical jungle surroundings had enchanted all my senses - melodious cries from parrots and peacocks, stunning visuals from the bamboo forest, a whole range of exotic smells from all kinds of flowers and plants. My chosen walking meditation was predominantly *Vipassana*, in other words *observation*, today focused on different sense doors: just being with the smell. Then just being with the sound. Then just being with the sight... It put me in a very deep and insightful trance.

So I answered her question honestly. "I actually can't tell the difference between being high on meditation or high on something else... What

exactly do you mean by *high*?" "I mean, the oily milk we were given by that wonderful woman... I think it was *Bhang*!"

Yi was right. It's not uncommon in India, especially for Shiva's followers, to include marijuana, known here as *Bhang*, inside drinks or food. Sometimes it's quite casually done for a mild high, and at others it's meant to make your mind soar, for example at a special event like *Shivratri* - Shiva's night.

I have a bigger body mass and wasn't affected that much, but she spent the next hours in a funny mix of joy and extravagance, doing headstands on the roadside, crying out loud, singing, lying on the ground, laughing at everything. We would sing mantras with my Tibetan bowl while crossing villages of bemused children. It was very funny.

But the high episode was put to an abrupt halt when we were invited for chai and Yi strongly disagreed, saying we had agreed to focus on distance. Many underlying emotions were

released, including her discomfort regarding our encounters with locals: communication was usually done through me instead of her, mostly because I speak Hindi, and partly because of gender inequality. It made her feel a bit left out, but we didn't come to a conclusion as to what we could really do about it.

A few hours' walk later we quit the road and set our mats for the night at yet another paradise river setting under the full moon...

Day 4

February 28th

Our breakfast consisted mostly of leftover sweets from before-yesterday's party. No choice in what we eat - it was whatever we happened to receive. My most serious addiction - food - was being cut at its root. No point in wanting anything if you can't choose, right?

And everything we owned was born from offerings, giving it a magical quality, better than if we could have chosen the fanciest foods.

Quite early in the day, we had a talk about the need for personal space and concluded that next time we would separate by accident, we wouldn't try to find each other. We'd simply see how it affects us to go our own ways, and keep walking until the next meeting point, which would be "the largest Shiva temple in the next major city". No technology: if we got lost Shiva would replace our phones. "The largest Shiva Temple" sounded like a good idea in this

country where every single city has at least one Shiva Temple.

Even after our agreement we spent most of the day together. In the afternoon, we came across a slum: Yi decided to sit in meditation under a tree facing the huts, made of rusty corrugated steel sheets loosely held together by string and shabby black plastic film. I realized that despite our radically different backgrounds, my current present-moment life with Yi was not entirely different from that of those children running barefoot around the slum. It felt like taking a dip into a lifestyle most westerners never get to know... we were so privileged.

Later in the afternoon, following a meal offered to us by a Tiki man - fried potato bun vendor - I was invited for chai by a local who had seen me before from his car. Yi turned down the invitation and kept walking, deciding we would meet later on.

I realized at some point that *later on* would mean tomorrow evening, at *the largest Shiva*

temple in the next major city as agreed this morning. Because Sanjay, the man who offered me chai, also told me about a Baba Ashram 20 minutes away, alongside Beas River, where I could spend the night.

Baba is an everyday Indian term literally meaning *Dad*. But religiously it means almost the same thing as *Sadhu*, except that it's warmer and more affectionate: we would call someone *Baba* to show that we consider him like our own Dad. A *Baba Ashram* is simply a temple held by a Baba, who welcomes guests to stay and sleep. It sounded very tempting.

So I went with the flow of the universe and gave the ashram a visit. It was secluded, surrounded by endless bushes of hemp, and faced a white sand beach that ran alongside Beas River. All around were statues of saints, including a ten-meter high *Hanuman* - the monkey God, visible from a distance. As I walked in, I was speechless, my heart beating as I took sight of the ashram's Baba, Rajesh Giri.

His eyes were smiling in a deep penetrative way, his entire face aglow with goodwill. I approached shyly - the grandness of his being made me feel small, and it was my first encounter with a Guru since I had taken the orange robes myself. He was sitting on a platform raised 20 centimeters high, subtly indicating his status, higher than the guests. He happened to be preparing chai in a brass pot boiling over his *Dhuni* - a Baba's sacred fire.

The Dhuni's attendant was Rajesh Giri's partner, Agni Mataji, who joyfully took to the task of carrying logs and breaking wood to keep the fire going from morning to night. Her name literally meant *mother of fire* and she fulfilled her role in the truest way. I was touched by her behind-the-scenes presence as much as by the Guru's outgoing beauty. They were both chanting mantras or singing songs during much of what they did.

The Guru's first question as I sat down by the fire wasn't *what's your name* but "can you sing?"

With infinite shyness, I pulled out my singing bowl and poorly sang a *Sarve Bhavantu Sukhina* mantra in Sanskrit, *may all beings be happy*. But somehow they really liked it! Rajesh Giri then went on singing most of the night, on Shiva, on Krishna, on Rama, halting once in a while to make more chai or to prepare a *chillum* - a cone-shaped cannabis pipe owned by Babas and handed around ceremonially.

Once in a while, I would be answering other guests' questions about my trip, but Rajesh Giri had a built-in ego-detector: as soon as I would get carried away talking about myself, he would cut me by repeating my words, but this time into a song with his drum. My discourse was instantly shattered and so was the image of myself as I laughed embarrassingly.

He was a skilled *Dholak* player and he would play this famous two-sided drum alongside mantras. It was like a private concert with catering included - chai and chillum from the Guru, food and heating from Agni Mataji.

It was also a good chance for me to ask about the color of my clothing. I did it as humbly as I could, saying I was a new, non-initiated Sanyasin, a young renunciate... so, was the orange-brown color of my clothing appropriate for my status?

I was answered that yes, while the high Guru was wearing vivid orange, my own orange-brown correctly stood for someone "normal" rather than an experienced Sadhu. I was greatly relieved: I had always been scared of accidentally pretending to be something I wasn't, in this world where a Sadhu's status is pretty specifically color-coded. He was an elder for sure and his dreadlocks dragged on the ground when he stood up, indicating he had been a Sadhu for just that long - 45 years I was told. He was too humble to say anything about his seniority himself, so I got this information from Mataji.

But he didn't even look more than 45 years old! I could feel I was in front of someone really

high. When the other guests left, I was offered dinner and a sleeping space along the fire, just me and the Guru. I couldn't believe the fortune I had. I meditated before bed and prayed that Yi was also doing well.

Day 5

March 1st

The day started with chai around the Dhuni and I tried to give the guru 80 rupees from my begging bowl. He refused. So instead I laid it at his feet, as he sat there looking at it. But in response, Agni Mataji came with a bag containing Sadhu clothing the same color as Rajesh Giri's and offered it to me. I was in awe... is this initiation? The same color as him? On top of that, the bag also contained 101 rupees, a sacred number in Hinduism. That translates to roughly one and a half US dollars, and in my situation a significant amount of money.

He went on to bless me, I bowed to both of them and was off, drunk with the divine.

The greatest relief of the day came when I first got the news that Yi had been seen this morning and was ok, and from then on people were updating me all along the way. It started with

"Oh, I saw another one dressed like you!", and from the following conversation I came to know she was six or seven kilometers ahead of me, or 1.5 hours' walk.

People driving by would tell me about her, or tell her about me, or even carry messages back and forth. We both ended up reaching the city of Hamirpur and met with the greatest of ease. She had been given food and chai while waiting for me and was beaming with joy. After a cheery talk together, we came to two conclusions. One: we really didn't need a phone. Shiva had us covered. Two: she was officially faster than me, mostly due to the fact I accepted too many invitations. I could hear my ego grumbling... I'm this great walker who crossed two continents, whereas this is her first long-distance walk... and she's faster than I am! Almost two hours per day faster!

We decided it wasn't late enough to settle down for the night, so we forgot about sleeping at the Shiva Temple and got back to the road. We

ended up walking quite late, and around 10 pm a man called us from his car. "Babaji, where will you spend the night? Come to my place!"

I was surprised that anyone would express such hospitality towards a random couple wandering in the dark, but somehow he seemed to make out we were Sadhus. We didn't have many options anyway, so I gladly accepted, but his house was still another three kilometers away... Yi and I would obviously not be taking his car, so he decided, with utmost patience, to drive bit by bit, giving us directions, until we reach his house together thirty minutes later.

Our host Ajay turned out to be so compassionate it was hard to believe. It was already 11 pm but he tended to our every need, serving us milk from his own buffalo along with snacks and fruit. We were given the fanciest room we've ever had together, and a hot tub of water with black salt to disinfect Yi's recent dog bite. This was like a hotel with room service, and we fell asleep very fast.

Day 6

March 2nd

Ajay's hospitality lasted all morning and his entire family undertook the job of serving us. They took great honor in it and we had never seen such reverence expressed towards us as Sadhus. It was seen as a holy practice to tend to our needs. Hindus believe great merit comes from serving the needy, and even more so in the case of renunciates, Sadhus, people given a holy status. We were seen off with 100 rupees each, homemade breakfast from their garden, fruit for the road, and a small Hindu book on Durga Mataji, a goddess portrayed sitting on a tiger.

The walk started with a vow from Yi that showed a great deal of wisdom: no matter what happens, she wouldn't word her opinion, but instead surrender to the flow of whatever I decided during our day. The result was so peaceful that even though I had the privilege of

making decisions, I was kind of jealous of the deep let-go in Yi's new attitude.

Throughout the walk, we would observe funny things about each other. We both noticed with humor that as my hunger grew during the day, I would start to say *Namaste* differently, more expressively, especially towards roadside restaurant owners. My subconscious was obviously looking for a meal. It was a bit embarrassing, but at least when I would catch that kind of thought, I would instantly recognize I strayed from the path and lost the original purpose. I would make an effort to come back to selfless love, compassion, and simple goodwill with no expectations... which, ironically, tends to lead to the next meal offering even faster!

At night we set our blankets in a beautiful forest setting under a half-moon half-starry sky. And this time our camp got an upgrade, as Yi manifested a candle out of nowhere, gifting it to me. "How did that get here?" I asked. Not a

word. So I stopped thinking and accepted the gift with joy. We could now keep writing our journals even after dark! Light is such a luxury. I mean life. Well, both.

Day 7

March 3rd

The sun was giving Yi a hard time and she suggested planning our day accordingly: manifesting a lunch break in the shade during the hottest hours. Fair enough, around noon, while enjoying our bath in a public roadside well, we were invited by a loving, devoted Hindu family who lived in a poor setting but still offered us the most wonderful meal of black dhal and yellow curry. I tried to give them the donation money I had recently received - they flatly refused, saying that this meal was not a gift from them but from God.

In the afternoon, we were invited to a celebration at a temple with a meal offering and talk with the *Swami*, the head priest. Yi and I were given so much esteem that we ended up in the longest photo session - more than 10 minutes of snapshots, phone after phone, Yi with this group, me with that couple, Yi and I

with this group and that couple, their children, their Swami, them touching our feet, them touching our knees, them joining their hands in Namaste, us standing there like puppets... of course it was uncomfortable. In fact it was way too much. But also a golden chance to observe social discomfort in an analytical, meditative way. The first 3 minutes were harder and harder to bear, staring at all those cameras and pretending to be enjoying it. Then came the step back, the analysis: so, what's wrong? What's this discomfort? Is it physical pain? Definitely not physical... so where is the grumbling from?

I came to realize all tension was born from my ego hoping to look as good as it could on every shot. When I let go of that, I stopped caring, and started genuinely enjoying myself. I forgot all about the cameras and simply stared at the countless beautiful Indian faces of all ages, themselves staring back in admiration. And the

irony: that made my own face glow and look better than if I cared about it.

It could have lasted one hour, I didn't mind anymore. I was enjoying the meditation. It also reminded me of a catchy phrase from Patrick Levy in his book named *Sadhus*: "Hindus love to love. Adoration is the attitude by which the ego takes pleasure in diminishing." Seen in this way, if their ego diminishes and I can keep mine unaffected, where's the problem?

We reached the town of Bilaspur at 11 pm, and the Lakshmi Temple where we were hoping to spend the night was long closed. Bodies weary and minds tired, we sat there in slight despair, wondering if we would get any sleep tonight. But after around ten minutes, a few men appeared on scooters, stopping in front of us as if they had been expecting it. They happened to know us already, as by now we had become a bit famous on the road. This unusual western Sadhu couple walking from village to village didn't go unnoticed...

They turned out to be from the police, but their only purpose was to help. They knew we were moneyless, on a foot-pilgrimage with no fixed home, and they spent the next 20 minutes making phone calls and comforting us that everything's going to be alright. My only concern was about them finding out Yi's nationality, so I was doing my best to keep a friendly flow and prevent them from getting too nosy.

It worked. No one asked a thing about her and they ended up bringing us to a *Gurudwara* - a Sikh temple, where all genders, castes, and religions are welcome for free, at any time of the day or night, to sleep, drink, eat, wash, whatever their needs may be. We were offered food and a private room in the temple with blankets. We went to sleep only at 2 am, full of gratitude for our hosts, but also quite a mix of emotions about the struggle it can be to find a place to stay. We strengthened our commitment to being there for each other, rock-solid, as a

team, no matter what the world would throw our way.

Day 8

March 4th

Sleep was perfect, healing in the good vibes of the Sikh atmosphere. We took the morning with ease and awareness, paying homage and giving *Dana* - religious donation, in the temple's central altar. I remembered the Sikh's unconditional goodness that I had come to know in my months spent living in Amritsar near the Golden Temple.

Yesterday, Rakesh Singh, our host and temple-keeper, had made us family since the first minute, inviting us for a meal although it was midnight, waiting meditatively for us to eat, then taking our plates and cleaning up, showing us the room, bringing us blankets, patiently assisting us until it was 1 am. He did everything with a subtle but deep smile that came from the soul. And now in the morning, he was there again to greet us, bringing us a breakfast of chai, chapati, pickled chili, and a chickpea dish.

He also let me use his phone for an online maps distance check.

The day was a bit too smooth to be true. We walked up the winding scenic road headed to Shimla, but veered right 60 kilometers earlier to take a path down the valley. As soon as we noticed we needed water, water came our way in the form of a roadside fountain where locals were washing their clothing. A very slim, dark-skinned Rajasthani woman in a bright but battered *Sari* - Indian dress, came to address me.

"Babaji! You are a Babaji, right? I have stress in my life. Worries in my mind, tension in my body, and stomach problems. What to do, Babaji?"

I was deeply touched by her frankness and immediate trust in me. I'm nowhere near a seasoned Guru with an answer to everything, but what can I do other than help her with whatever I do know? So it started by sitting cross-legged on the wet, dirty ledge. "For

worries in your mind, sit however you wish but with your back straight, and relax your whole body, from head to foot. Body and mind are closely connected, so as tension in the body is released, tension in the mind will follow." I did my best to express in broken Hindi. "After relaxing your body, simply observe your breath. Natural, uncontrolled breath. Aware of every in-breath, aware of every out-breath, calmly and attentively... worries will cease to exist. As for the pains you mention in your body... I suggest free Yoga. Whatever your body calls you to do."

Still sitting on the floor, I did a few easy *asanas* - Yoga postures - and pulled my neck left and right. "Yoga solves everything... as for the stomach pain, meditate on your abdomen, deepening your breath."

"Thank you Babaji! Oh, and one last thing... what is the name of God? What should I recite?" At those words, a slightly uneasy thought appeared in my mind that whatever I was saying now could have a big influence on her life. I

measured my words. "God doesn't have one name, and you don't have to recite it. Instead of reciting, just listen. You will hear God."

Her face was glowing. "Thank you so much, Babaji!" and she was off. Before I knew it, I had given my first *Darshan* - a snippet of teaching, of sharing, between a Sadhu and a layperson. It seemed to brighten her day so I was very pleased.

Evening settled on our gravelly mountain road, and after stumbling in the dark with no flashlight and pressingly asking for directions to anyone we could find, we reached the Shiva Temple we were looking for. It was another *Baba Ashram* - a temple held by a sedentary Baba. I approached the gateway with hands in Namaste, a bit shyly. "May I come in?" "Yes of course." I came in. I slowly walked my way to the Dhuni, the central fire. "May I sit down?" "Yes, sit down."

I sat down with Yi to my right. To my left, Jagdu Muni, the Ashram's Baba, was facing the

Dhuni on an elevated surface, and three other men sat around, calmly, mostly in silence. He was 78, had a comforting warm face in which I could see my own grandfather, a long white beard, orange-yellow clothing and a really chill attitude. He started by lighting a chillum and passed it around. We talked a bit about the different types of Babas, how some, like him, can get married, how his wife had passed away... He was gentle and lovable. We were served an enchanting meal of cornflour *chapati* - Indian flatbread, and vegetables. Our bed was then made for us inside the temple itself, amongst statues of deities and altar rooms. We couldn't believe it. We were sleeping in a sanctuary.

Day 9

March 5th

Waking up in the temple was magic. It started with a 6 am *Puja* - Hindu ceremonial worship, of drums, bells, and a conch horn, that felt like getting jolted back to life after the passivity of one night's sleep. We followed by doing our Yoga and Taichi routines under the temple arches with a view on the valley. Their hospitality was unending - they would bring us chai even during our practice. Before leaving, I had prepared 100 rupees from my almsbowl to give back at least something as a token of my gratitude. But when I approached the Baba, instead *he* gave me 100 rupees. He acted first and it was obviously my duty to take it. Yi and I were really spoilt. The most homeiful of the homeless... princes amongst the beggars.

After just two kilometers we heard a second temple's *Puja* and were told it was yet another Baba Ashram. We made our way down and met

Sat Giri, a half-naked Naga Sadhu so friendly and open-hearted that we were buddies at first glimpse. He offered us almond-milk, breakfast, showed us photos of when he was a fully naked Sadhu, and suggests a chillum, which I politely refused - it was 10 in the morning! He then went on to give invaluable teachings about the Sadhu *Akharas* - different branches, or schools, of Hinduism. We were having such a good time that none of the lot wanted to see us leave, and they implored us to stay for dinner too, as well as the coming night... But we obviously had to take the road. We couldn't call it a day after just two kilometers.

We had a pleasant day's walk but our energy was a bit low, and the interesting topic came up of desire towards sweets, in my case brownies. Next, all kinds of foods we didn't have the slightest hope of finding in our new lifestyle. I observed my thoughts come and go and the whole thing became a game in my mind, where the dissatisfaction of unfulfilled desire ceased

to really exist or affect me, becoming external, a bit like the moment you realize, when the credits scroll up after two hours, "Oh yeah, it was just a movie!"

In the evening, we were told of a Krishna temple a few kilometers ahead. Timing was divinely aligned and as darkness drew in the temple appeared to our left. We were led in by a lovable old man who lived just beside, and who started our exchange by putting money in our almsbowls.

"My name is Shankar Lal, but you can just call me Shiva" he said laughing. We sat down for a musical Puja led by a Krishna Pandit whose name I still don't know. He would answer "I have no name but the name of God." The Puja involved skillful chanting and was followed by a meal made specially for Yi and I on his simple floor kitchen. He did everything with humbleness, straightforwardness, and grace. We were given all the bedding we could imagine and a private room for the both of us.

Day 10

March 6th

After the 6:30 Puja, chai from the Pandit, and another chai from Shankar Lal, we were seen off. I was bathing in gratitude until I came to know Yi's side of the story - upon saying goodbye the Pandit had touched her in an inappropriate way. On afterthought, as I was trying to figure out the whole story, I realized it might have been a false conception born when he asked me the question "are you married?", and after my "no" he might have deduced that we must be westerners of the free love type. But his hospitality had been so exemplary I still hardly believe he could have the slightest trace of negative intentions towards anyone...

Yi was in anguish at the event and this brought to the surface an unease regarding gender equality that had been growing in her for the past three years in India. In a cry of protest, she decided to make a bold point by removing her

clothes, threw them in the middle of the street, and sat by the roadside naked.

I tried to act before any more trouble would come our way, picked up her clothes from the road and did my best at convincing her to dress up.

A whole hour went by and we were surrounded by angry villagers threatening to call the police. She then decided to change her approach: she stood up and walked away emphatically, down the road towards the next village, entirely naked except for her backpack.

I was frozen, not knowing what to do. After she was gone came a car of policemen who started accusing me, checked my visa, asked me about drugs, and ordering me to get in the car. I answered that my pilgrimage was strictly on foot. They insisted. I insisted. Their voices became aggressive and they ordered me to stand. Finally they let me walk, but I was told to follow the car as it drove on.

In a desperate move led by my gut feeling, I left the road onto a forestry beaten track as soon as the car was out of sight. All kinds of thoughts scrambled through my head as I scrambled through the woods. I knew she was done for as soon as they had checked my own visa. She would get the same treatment, and they would come to know she had no visa at all, on top of being from a country currently at war with India. At best, she would be deported from India. At worst, she would be put in jail like many other Chinese without visas these days.

All this dismay was racing through my head as I raced down the forested valley, away from the police. I sighed at the outcome of our situation and wished I had managed to convince her otherwise.

After 20 minutes, quite a bit further into the countryside I was invited for tea by peace-loving lumberjacks. I stopped and breathed a bit... they humbly gave me 20 rupees, called me Babaji, chai was on its way...

And out of nowhere came a police car. The cops walked to me without a word, picked up sticks of wood cut by the lumberjacks, and started beating me. They shouted insults and dragged me into their car. I exclaimed in protest. "What the hell, guys?! What am I doing wrong?" "Shut up!"

I sat in gloom as the car drove on to God knows where. I reluctantly asked the main officer "Where are you taking me?" "We're taking you to your friend to sort things out." They drove me to where Yi was sitting on the ground, this time clothed, showing a grave face, surrounded by a crowd of villagers all looking concerned. They made her get into the car and drove us on for 15 minutes. The cops wouldn't explain what they were doing, but I had seen this exact situation in China - they were simply kicking us out of their assigned district to avoid having to deal with us. So they dropped us on a random gravel road, told us not to come back, and disappeared.

I was stunned by the events. But the violence from that encounter was subdued by the relief of knowing she was ok: by some weird miracle they had checked neither her visa nor nationality, they hadn't deported her, they hadn't thrown me in jail... maybe they were too busy trying to get her clothes on.

But trauma lingered on and the rest of my day was uneasy, to say the least. Yi sensed it, and asked me in the afternoon as we sat in the shade of a shabby bus stop "Can I have some money from your receivings?" "Why?" "To take the bus back to Dharamshala. I don't want to harm you anymore."

I was taken aback. "If this is about me, then don't worry. We're a team. Forget what happened: we started this together, we're ending this together." And thus things became lighter, and we kept walking until evening where we set our bed under the stars, on completely empty stomachs. The sum of what I had today was two chais and one tangerine. For

Yi, same thing but without the tangerine. Basically not much. We were hungry but happy and had a beautiful night, even when it started raining on us at 1 am. The wind kept blowing away our flimsy plastic tarp and most of our things ended up wet... but for some reason we didn't even curse: instead we laughed about it!

"Yi, check it out, the sheet's flying away again! Our stuff is all wet. Are you awake, Yi?" "Yeah I'm awake, but, whatever, maybe we should do something?" "I'll just try to hold the corner with my left hand while I sleep. Or tie it to my water bottle or something" "Sounds good!"

Day 11

March 7th

In the morning we were invited for chai and salty fried crackers by a roadside restaurant. "It's the first time we eat something savory in... 40 hours!" Yi exclaimed in appreciation. The owners were so touched they immediately added two samosas and tangerines to our receivings. We were in joy. Food had never tasted this good.

In mid-afternoon we were stopped by a bright and smiling woman named Priyanka. She loved our Sadhu initiative, she wanted to learn more on meditation and Yoga, and she happened to be the principal of a large school in a neighboring village. She heartily invited us to spend a night there, have dinner and breakfast with the children, and share something about meditation. Even though this added 16 kilometers to our road, we saw it as *Karma Yoga* - selfless service, and really wanted to help.

After so many things given, this was the first time something was actually asked from us. Yi noticed something else: 16 km was the estimated distance during which we were forced in the police car, so in a way it equalled out our journey that was meant to be entirely on foot. So we did the 3-hour extra distance and reached the school. It was much bigger and more imposing than we had imagined.

Thus we went from being criminals to guests of honor: we were praised by everyone, the children, the staff, security... we played with the students, made new friends of all ages, had our first full meal in 48 hours, washed our clothes for the first time in 12 days, and passed out on the bed. Not to mention it was a bed!

Day 12

March 8th

We joined the children at 6:30 for their morning walk, but we added, as requested yesterday, the concept of walking meditation and how to observe our breath. We had a beautiful time and everyone was grateful.

Not long after, once breakfast with the students was finished, we were asked to give a talk on kindness in the conference hall. It turned out to be a huge room with a stage and microphones, and it immediately started filling up with students, making clean rows, more and more tightly packed... until a total of 250 students stood there watching, waiting for the next step. To our bemused astonishment Yi and I were publicly introduced by Principal Priyanka as *spiritual leaders* and invited to come on stage. I had never given a talk to this many people, nor been given such high esteem... to cut through the unease I chose to drop my ego and just

focus on my personal practice - dedicate every instant to awareness, my own awareness, make best use of the present moment to cultivate myself. Yi and I gave a talk on kindness, and I guided a *Metta* meditation - cultivating compassion. We even did some Yoga, the best we could with each student's limited space. It worked miraculously. The students were cheery, teachers full of thanks, Yi and I overflowing with appreciation. I genuinely felt a flow of love towards every student there, observing the sea of faces... unforgettable images to stay engraved in my mind.

We were seen off as saints, treated to gifts, photoshoots, more chai, and even a box of chocolates from Principal Priyanka.

I don't know what you think about chocolate. I'm guessing it's not that big a deal. But to us moneyless beggars who hadn't had that kind of treat since the beginning of the trip, it was pretty significant!

Near sunset after the day's walk, we had started climbing another mountain to pursue our road through Dagshai, a town built by the British during the colonial era with genuine historical and cultural wealth. But I felt exhaustion, hunger, and traces of worry creeping inside... It was getting dark soon... no food... still a while before reaching the next town... a large gloomy cloud looming ahead was ditching our hopes of sleeping outside... and we were almost out of drinking water.

But we happened to cross an unassuming old man climbing the hill with a cane. Gurdial Sandhu was 87 years old, nearly deaf, breathing heavily, and yet fit enough to climb that hill at almost the same pace as we were! We talked to him through written notes and improvised sign language... deaf but far from dumb, he would answer us in flawless English. He looked very wise and cultivated, and when we finally reached town together, we realized he must be one of the most esteemed people in this

settlement. He was born here, right amongst the British authorities, 20 years before they lost the war with India. At 87 he had been here longer than anyone, and at the heart of the administration since his early years. As we crossed this enchanting European town of forts and churches, all the officers bowed down to him in honor. How lucky are we to be friends with this man!

He brought us to his house, where his entire family showed the same goodwill, affection, and generosity. We were given the most varied homemade meal so far, including tea, biscuits, chapati, dhal, curry, three types of pickles, hot milk, coffee, and even camel-milk ice cream. Followed by so many smiles and hugs and photoshoots and jokes and first-hand facts about Indian-British colonial history...

Finally they led us to a private bedroom upstairs in this European-style home that actually felt like Switzerland. Yi and I were

overwhelmed. They were so sweet, life was so rich.

Day 13

March 9th

Hospitality went on and on, with roasted cashews over chai, followed by a hearty breakfast, an entire meal packed for take-away, and a donation of more than 1000 rupees... enough to pay for every meal until our destination in Haridwar if we wanted to. Goodbye was very emotional for them, tears were shed and we were treated like grandchildren.

After we made our way down from the hilltop village, we came across three Sadhus, all dressed in different colors. One in white, one in light orange, one in dusty black. I had heard that *Agori Babas* dress in black and sleep in graveyards, so with Yi we asked him just that. "Yes I do", he answered with a beaming smile. Despite the disturbing practices often attributed to Agoris like worshipping the dead, drinking alcohol, eating meat or even human flesh, and

making a point to break just about every taboo defined by society, he was my favorite one of the trio. I decided to give them 50 rupees each out of fairness. They all looked happy except for the one dressed in orange, whose face changed instantly.

"You gave me 50, but how much do you have in total?" I couldn't believe his question. "I don't count my money, Babaji" I answered flatly. "Tell the truth!" he snapped back. "What do you mean? Of course that's the truth" "Tell me the truth in front of Lord Shiva!" he added as he took out a small statue. "How much money do you have?!" He was getting closer to me in an increasingly intrusive way. I growled back "What do you want, Babaji? My money is none of your business." Despite the firmness in my voice he went on to ask the same thing to Yi, and then to me again another three times in an aggressive way. "Leave us alone. I gave you 50 and you don't thank me? We're finished. Om Nama Shivaya."

The two others, much more peaceful, were long gone, as if they had lost faith in their friend. Finally he gave up and left us alone. *Fake Baba*, I thought to myself. A corrupt beggar dressed as a saint, with so much contempt he practically threatens for money. A disgrace to that poor Shiva statue... at least my lesson was learned. Don't judge an ounce of a man by his clothing or apparent status: judge him only by his inner qualities. That's why Yi had decided not to hand out money at all in this encounter, and she was right. How ironic, that the first time I felt a trace of fear towards someone else, it was another Sadhu. But the lesson was clear and my faith was firm. Maybe even firmer than before, as I realized that Yi and I weren't really novices on the path. In contrast with many Sadhus who might have been initiated decades ago, but whose attitude was so much more money-oriented...

No, my path with Yi didn't seem too bad at all. It had been 13 days and we still hadn't asked

for anything to anyone besides drinking water, and in one instance a metal spoon from the school where we gave a teaching, after I had lost mine. I guess the most we had asked for was hospitality in temple grounds, but even then, we had our own bedding with us and didn't request anything material. Everything we received was a result of our hosts' generous initiatives. As for the money, not only had we never asked for a rupee, but all the money we received in our almsbowl, we had either already donated it back to the needy or it was still waiting for a time where it would really be needed. We hadn't bought anything yet. Even the 36 hours previously spent without food wasn't enough to trigger our decision to start spending money for ourselves.

And after leaving that amazingly generous family, the feeling of having this kind of money on us taught us an interesting lesson brought to light by Yi: it didn't actually feel good. Even a bit unsettling. She now longed the time where

we would have 30 rupees in our almsbowl and that was it. In fact, she was the most happy that one time she had given every rupee to a Sadhu who wanted a bus ticket to Kumbha Mela.

We kept walking the day away and proceeded to set camp on top of a forested hill, where we had a fire-roasted dinner of our morning-hosts' chapatis and the most peaceful star-lit night.

Day 14

March 10th

Yi had been showing symptoms of stomach parasites for two days now. It was worrying me a bit, but it was a very common problem on this kind of trip. It's true we were drinking whatever water we received, we didn't own soap, we ate whatever we had in whatever conditions. I did my best to give Yi advice but I know it's a condition you don't easily get rid of...

With a bit of struggle we managed to find a computer in the town of Sarahan and I painstakingly did my visa extension from the state's laggy website. Yi waited patiently. It was funny taking a dip back into the digital age, and I noticed my mind in a hurried, slightly stressed state for the first time since we left home two weeks ago. Probably an indicator I should change my approach - meditation has no exceptions. It should be applied to everything. After one hour of refreshing broken webpages

and refilling forms, I succeed with a sigh of relief.

As evening fell we were invited to spend the night in a Baba Ashram, where the head Baba had left to Kumbha Mela. So it was up to Yi, me, and around ten other folks, all brothers or sons or uncles or cousins, to create the music and vibes. They served us amazing homemade food, music went on for hours, we had a really festive time, and finally Yi and I were left alone to have the absent Baba's room overnight.

Day 15

March 11th

We started the day a bit hazy from the long night and short rest, but hey, today was Shivratri, Shiva's yearly celebration, so let's embrace our disconnectedness and enjoy the high. On top of that, people consider Shivratri to be specially dedicated to Sadhus, so Yi and I got even more attention, more offerings, more entertainment from everyone on the road.

We were handed pieces of hash and *bhang* foods made with marijuana leaves more often than we could count. We noticed with a laugh how hashish seems to be a common currency in the world of Babas, almost more than money. We were also invaded by selfie sessions to the point where when a car would stop, we would be praying it wasn't for us. We got a first taste of what it was like to be famous, as more and more people seemed to recognize us from afar... and it wasn't that thrilling. We kind of longed

the time we were left to walk in silence, unnoticed, enjoying the scenery.

We reached the hilltop city of Nahan quite late into the night, and we received an invitation so casual it seemed unreal. A boy on a scooter stopped beside us and his first words were "Come for dinner!" His house happened to be just there in front of us, and we were offered a healthy meal, bhang lassi, bhang pakora, and at our very hopeful request, a space to sleep on the flatrooftop. Tonight was Shivratri, but to balance out last night's liveliness we chose to contemplate Shiva under the silence of the stars instead of wild dance and music. I had a deeply meditative night. Om Nama Shivaya.

Day 16

March 12th

Yi's birthday immediately followed Shivratri as if planned by the deities. We decided to make this day stand out: we were going to spend the entire time without a single obligation, no need to do distance or get anywhere, simply slow life down, dedicate it to stillness... I internally decided to dedicate my day to Yi's well-being and do my best to erase all my own thoughts and priorities, wants and needs. The result was heavenly.

For me, it started with an exciting concept: buying something. This was day fifteen of the trip and until now we were still wondering when would we finally feel the need to buy. How far could we make it by resisting the urge, despite having all this money from donation? I felt that today was a good chance and a worthy, selfless cause to break the taboo. I bought yogurt and handmade cookies from a nearby

bakery to prepare a birthday breakfast while Yi was doing her Yoga. It felt right. It wasn't about sense pleasures or personal desire, it was about giving. I also shared some with the family hosting us, greatly thanking them for their kindness.

We spent much of our day strolling around and sitting, meditatively watching the world... we had a meal at the community kitchen of Rani Tal Shiva Temple, the biggest in Nahan, which had formally celebrated Shivratri yesterday. Today was also celebrated with music and food but much quieter than had we come before, and we really enjoyed it.

We then set out for a special kind of begging: birthday Bhiksha. The idea was to train our willpower and manifest a cake before the end of the day. So we chose a location that started with a joke: "Let's just sit and meditate beside that cake shop!" exclaimed Yi. "But then again" she added, "that's a bit too obvious, come on... a shame to religion..."

"Who cares" I answered, "Let's do it for fun! A test in our ability to manifest things." So we set our *assan* - a rectangular cloth sheet that defines a Sadhu's home and sitting space - to the right of the cake shop on a ledge that was perfectly shaped for our practice. As I reached out to lay the almsbowl, Yi stopped me. "I don't think we even need it. We're not doing this for money."

So almsbowl-less it was. For the first 20 minutes, we were totally invisible, getting wet in the rain and watching the world go by. As long as I thought about material result, it seemed like we were getting nowhere. So I changed my attitude and decided this was nothing more, nor less, than an open-eyed meditation based on Metta, selfless love. I would ease my gaze into space and observe the sacred flow of passers-by, internally wishing each and every one to be happy.

Within just a minute of this new approach, I heard a voice calling out. "Chai, Babaji? And

maybe a samosa with your chai?" Perfect. I answered cheekily "Thank you. Actually, it's my friend's birthday and the only currency we currently accept is... cake!"

He disappeared wordlessly, leaving me to wonder what I was doing with my life. I kept sitting there, not too confident in my approach, until the man appeared again with chai and two plates of cake. Yi had been sitting in lotus with closed eyes the whole time and knew nothing of the event. When she opened them she was taken aback. Two slices of cake! We made it! We manifested it!

By then, a growing crowd had formed around us and we even got a slightly discordant happy birthday song by the most enthusiastic ones. The most original birthday party I've ever witnessed, I thought to myself.

Rakesh, the man who brought the cake, followed by inviting us to spend the night in his newly built home. Fruit shakes, dinner, chai, and a memorable night's sleep in a room so new

we were actually its very first occupants. This kind of luxury we would never have expected, and apart from the cake, her second birthday wish also came true: finally a hot shower!

Day 17

March 13th

On top of his family's hospitality, Rakesh saw us off with 500 rupees each, more than a day's salary here...

Today we started to experiment with different ways of "buying" things: giving money and accepting goods. But we wanted to break the usual habit pattern and turn it into "giving - giving" instead of "paying - taking". The results were enchanting.

It started with two women humbly selling home-grown tomatoes by the roadside. Yi was very attracted to the farmers and their goods, but not to the idea of conventionally buying things like thoughtless consumers. So she approached them with a 20 rupee note, brought it to her forehead, and handed it to them. "Whatever you wish to give us in exchange for this Dana", we added. The women were so touched, they replied "We're giving you 20 rupees of tomatoes,

but keep your money, please." Yi insisted and took the lead. "No, the money was a donation to us, so we pass it on to you." She's better at making people accept things than I am. It ended in a fair and memorable exchange, so much more meaningful than just buying something.

Later in the day, I realized we needed a candle for our nights in the forest, as our previous one was finished. Not that we ever really need anything, but the candle was still a pretty cool addition to our forest camps. I approached a small roadside shop, ready to experiment. "Namaste Mataji, apke pass mumbatia hai? *Do you have candles?*" "Han, hai. Yes, I do" she answered with a smile. "We sleep in the forest and it's our only source of light..." I added.

She returned with a candle which she handed to me. I brought it to my forehead and tried to give her 30 rupees, more than the usual price of a candle. "Keep your money, and keep the candle. No, actually, have two candles! And sit

down for a cup of chai made with our family cow's milk."

As predicted, we spent the night in the forest, and for dinner we made salad from today's tomatoes, mixed with handfuls of hemp that I had picked on the road. Hemp, known as Cannabis or Marijuana when it's smoked, is actually a superfood. Not that many people know, and even the local Indians usually have no idea - getting high isn't its only purpose. When eaten raw, the active THC doesn't come into play but instead you have a food so nutritious you could eat it alone for days and your health would be amazing. Cannabis is a plant native to India, and it was growing absolutely everywhere as we crossed Himachal Pradesh, so much that locals often see it as an invasive weed. But if we know its nutritional value, we also know we're surrounded by free food 24/7. Pretty neat!

Day 18

March 14th

I realized that this might well be our last morning in nature on our way to Haridwar. As we left the forest, we were increasingly surrounded by human activity, towns, construction, agriculture... now officially in the flatlands, we kind of missed the freedom and wilderness that came with the mountain environment, but we knew it was part of the process.

We reached Paonta Sahib in the afternoon, a sacred Sikh city named after Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the second most revered figure of Sikhism. The first being Guru Nanak, whose texts had already lured me into this humble open-minded religion many years ago. They promote gender and caste equality, respect towards all religions, and unconditionally offer food and lodging to anyone, whatever their background. I really love them and can't believe one of their most

sacred cities happened to be straight on our path.

But before reaching the Sikh Temple, I had an administrative task to deal with, made very complicated by the fact I didn't own a phone. My current visa was expired, the extension I had applied for several days ago was "missing documents", and unless I managed to solve the problem online, the whole trip could be put to an end by a simple police check, which seemed to be increasing too as we neared the border with Uttarakhand. We finally found an internet cafe, and a process I thought would take 5 minutes turned out to take one and a half hours. The staff was so kind that they didn't want anything in exchange for their service, and instead gave us a bag full of cookies and fruit juice. Yi's patience was endless and she took the whole thing lightly, meditating outside, talking to the mother, playing with the children... I'm so grateful she lightened the mood and made me feel at ease amidst the endless bureaucracy I

was dealing with. Session complete, I didn't have the visa yet but things were looking good.

Thanks to directions given to us at the internet cafe, we finally made our way to the Sikh Temple and entered a universe of kindness, peace, generosity, and tolerance. We were given our own family suite with private bathroom, lock and key, completely for free, no questions asked even for this unmarried couple. We also came to discover Sikh sword fighting and martial arts, after which I shared my Chinese Kung Fu with the kids and we compared each other's moves in a playful way that brought me back to childhood. Yi and I then had a meal at the 24-hour community kitchen and went to bed bathing in gratitude.

Day 19

March 15th

We had breakfast in the community kitchen to savor our last moments in this heavenly environment, we made donations, received *halva* - a sweet Indian treat we both had come to love - and we were off.

This was a significant day, our first state-border crossing. On top of that, the border coincided with Yamuna, a sacred river I had heard about only in mantras, one of the three that join to make the Ganga later on. I couldn't resist the urge to take a dip inside before the border bridge. And it didn't feel like bathing in water but bathing in bliss...

We then made our way across the bridge as I focused on Metta, compassion, meditating my way across, praying we wouldn't get stopped by border guards with our now two invalid visas... Metta works, and we get through without a hiccup or even a glance. Strawberries happened

to be everywhere and free of cost for Sadhus, so let's celebrate with strawberries!

In the afternoon, we met an eccentric half-naked Baba with a man-sized trident and a red *lungi* - Baba's skirt. His answers to our questions were so simple it was almost disturbing. His name? Babaji. His home? In his chest. His bed? Right here on the ground. His family? All of humanity.

I was very fond of him and Yi specially felt a unique connection. He made *tillaks* on our foreheads - ceremonial marks made from white ash or colored powder that define a Hindu. In this case he was using ashes from the chillum he had just smoked. He then blew his conch to say goodbye, sang Shiva's names and saw us off.

We walked for a few hours into the night and ended up with an invitation in pitch dark by Shanti, a woman so loving it felt like we had known each other for years. Her daughters and son turned out just as caring, and we had dinner like princes.

After a bit of light-hearted arguing, we convinced her to let us sleep on the roof under the stars, instead of the brand new, clean, warm, cozy, furnished room she was trying to give us. She had no clue how anyone could choose the open sky over a fancy room... As for us, we had no inclination at all to spend our night staring at a ceiling when we knew the magic of sleeping under the stars.

The whole thing did upset her a bit but also gave her a hint that joy can come from simplicity instead of comfort.

Day 20

March 16th

Sunrise on the rooftop was picturesque. After our morning Yoga, the family wouldn't let us go without a shower of gifts, but we did leave the place a bit overwhelmed from social activity. To balance our minds, we chose to spend the rest of the day talking to no one, with *Muni Baba* written on our forearm. *Muni* refers to a vow of silence, someone who abstains from talking for religious or spiritual reasons - to quiet the mind.

So I enjoyed silence from midday to sunset save for a few words of essential communication with Yi. It changed my state of mind in a pretty radical way. In the first hour, my head was still resonating with random thoughts, mostly conversations from the previous hours repeated in a loop, as all brains tend to do. But when the silence lengthens, thoughts quiet down... What a relief to be free from social constraints!

At some point near the evening we were invited by Ayushi, a lively teenage girl really keen to see foreigners. By then Yi was talking again, while I was still in silence. It made a meaningful balance, and my silence seemed to draw a lot of respect from Ayushi's family, all devout Hindus. We were offered halva, chai, and the best *pakoras* - crisp-fried salty snacks, of our lives. Then the sun disappeared behind the horizon, marking the official end of today's Muni vow for me. My silence was finished but I felt like a new person. Every word came out mindfully, calmly, frugally, slow but succinct, and straight to the point. I really liked my new mind and wished it would stay that way.

But after the pleasantness of our exchange, the end of an already long day was the beginning of a yet harder night. Yi's stomach parasites were still lingering and seemed to be getting worse. Now down into the plains in an increasingly urban environment, the dusty air and traffic pollution was also hitting us hard. My mucus

was dark gray, my throat getting hoarse, and I was coming down with some kind of fever. Yi's symptoms weren't that great either, her whole body sore, her right eye apparently infected or inflated from dust, and the non-stop thundering of traffic and horns getting to both of our heads. For the night, we chose to place all our bets on the famous Tibetan Buddhist community and temple complex of Dehradun. It also happened to be the chosen residence of Sakya Trizin, head of one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. I'd really love to meet him.

But getting there took four more hours than suggested by locals, and we ended up exhausted, at 11 pm, in front of a security guard telling us we were too late: the temple had been closed for a year already because of the covid pandemic. It was simply shut locked and no outsiders were allowed in, period.

I deflated, we sat on a ledge and Yi tried to cheer me up, saying she still had faith. Fair enough, after a few phone calls by the security

guy, the scene changed pretty radically. "Actually, we found a solution for your night. My shift is over just now, 11 pm. Just come sleep at my place! I'll cook for you and you can meet my folks."

We were amazed by his openness. Fair enough, we spent the night there, dinner-chai-shower-bedding included, as well as the company of his sisters and mother, who all loved us.

Day 21

March 17th

The walk in such heavy traffic was a bit challenging. Yi's symptoms were slightly improving and mine were getting worse. In a sedentary lifestyle, falling ill usually means taking leave from work and resting until you feel better. But currently our own work was simply managing survival without money. Finding clean water, food, a place to sleep every night, and doing the distance... No one can take care of that for us while we stay in bed.

We were still invited for food and cane juice despite our uninviting lowly states, and by late afternoon God even gave us a break from the city environment by manifesting a jungle full of monkeys and cozy dry leaves to spend our night healing in nature. Our dinner was made of two ingredients: a raw cabbage and some black salt which had been given to us on the road. Oh, and a few drops of lemon essential oil Yi had

been carrying with her for medical reasons. But it's lemon, after all! We really enjoyed the meal.

Day 22

March 18th

Our night in the jungle turned out really therapeutic. We both felt like it marked the turning point of our evolving aches and illnesses, and we felt much better than yesterday. Nature's calm vibes have such healing properties...

We were now officially on the highway and it was a joy compared to the hectic dusty roads we trod the previous days. The highway was obviously busy, but it was clean and dust-free, and as walkers we had the whole emergency lane to ourselves. We didn't cross many villages, walking in peace and meditation, and when we did, the people were bright, loving, and generous. We even set the record for a total of seven chais in one day! Yi and I laughed about it and wondered if it was karmically ok.

My shoe had broken twice today and I had repaired it once, still ending the day barefoot. I'd do my best until Haridwar where I could hand it to a shoe repair guy. Just 20 more kilometers, the trip there was almost over, it was even hard to believe...

After a failed attempt at sleeping by the river without being seen, we chose to spend the night in a Satnarayan Temple by the roadside. The *Pujari* - man in charge of the temple grounds and its ceremonies, was nice to us and very minimal: after a few sentences' exchange saying it's better to spend the night indoors because of tigers, he led us to a room with no bedding and not much at all really, other than a whole lot of space and Shiva's family members on the walls. Our source of water was a hand-pumped well, and the "bathroom" was outside the temple, wherever we pleased. We were given two bananas each and a *Ladu* - Indian sweet semolina ball. I kind of liked the atmosphere. Yi

and I agreed, being left alone was the greatest of luxuries.



Part II

The Destination

कुम्भ मेला

Day 23

March 19th

It was 4:30 am and we had hardly got any sleep because of a family of large rats living in the room. They would shuffle around all night, knock things down and even climb onto our faces as we tried to sleep. So we chose to bring our bedding onto the roof and finish the night there. A seemingly good idea... We slept well, until we came downstairs at 7 am and realized that all our stuff there was missing. After digging in trash cans, asking people around and searching frantically, we found almost everything, but Yi's clothing, top and bottom, which she had put up to dry after washing the previous night, had totally disappeared. We investigated for several hours, going through all kinds of emotions. Yi was still wearing her sweater and sleeping thermals in the hot sun, and there was no way we could take the road like this. So she decided to go on a strike in front of the janitor's hut, the woman we

suspected would have taken the clothes, as she had also taken our almsbowls that we had to insist on getting back.

The strike meant not to move until the clothes were returned, by whichever means. It lasted a few hours, during which the woman herself as well as the temple priest offered us clothing and fabric, saying they were even willing to sew it themselves. It was really touching and finally Yi decided to buy the clothing worn by the janitor: layperson's clothing, and in the same move publicly give up nunhood as a mark of her disappointment in these so-called religious places. The deal was made and we hit the road around noon, but Yi did miss the clothing we had spent days making together by hand, of a symbolic color that bound us together...

Yi's new attire marked the end of her life as a nun. We joked around that being a layperson, she would do all the buying from now on! But after all, this was a meaningful event, as her new colors seemed to suit her beliefs. A black

Kurta - the Indian top, same color as Agoris, those who follow their own inner truth rather than society-defined dogma, never afraid of breaking taboos. Along with a white *Sharwal* - the wide pants: in the Sadhu world, white often refers to not belonging to one fixed belief system but rather being open to every one of them. So these two together make quite a balanced mix.

We were both slightly ill and struggling with the never-ending dust. But our spirits raised as we reached Haridwar and had a bit of time to sit. We were invited for a meal by rather wealthy Indian visitors, consisting of "everything we want on the menu". Such choice somehow troubled us both, as we had completely lost the art of consumerism during these past 23 days, and everything we had eaten was simply the result of whatever was given. After that, we had a walk around 9 pm Haridwar, a really pleasant and connected experience, where locals at every street corner would help guide us to someplace

that would host pilgrims for free. After three failed attempts at a Sikh Temple and two Ashrams, we were drawn to sounds of women chanting and ended up in a Krishna temple. They greeted us with unconditional love, fed us, we sang together on Krishna and Shiva, and were given bedding for the night.

We were also surrounded pretty fast by entire clouds of mosquitoes and we had to use my net for the first time on this trip. We slept beautifully, but both a bit worried about how to deal with them if this went on on a nightly basis...

Day 24

March 20th

We woke up with bells, greetings of Hare Krishna, morning Yoga and chai. We were left with the heartwarming feeling that we already had a place of refuge in Haridwar.

We walked on for five minutes, and there it was... the most venerated river... the stream said to flow from Shiva's hair and to embody his being... India's pride... the holy Ganga. I had never seen it before and imagined it, from stories, to be so muddy and polluted that its only function would be ritual. How wrong was I! The color was of a pale turquoise-blue, you could see right through the water, and a pleasant freshness invaded the air. The whole world inside me came to stillness, everything disappeared but this sacred moment. The gentle flow seemed to slow everything down, so peaceful that I had a hard time imagining this was anywhere near the center of Haridwar. We

crossed the bridge onto an even more peaceful side and settled down in the shade made by hanging our fabrics on a rail beside the river. We shared a symbolic papaya, after which I slowly stood up to set foot at last, in infinite meditation, into the Ganga's shallow bank. The cool water ran between my toes as a wave of gratitude pervaded my body, and I slowly made my way towards the deeper side, savoring every step, every smooth stone beneath my feet, the gentle breeze caressing my skin, sacredness imbued in the air... I brought my hands to the sky, down into prayer and prostrated under the water, hugging the world. After two more prostrations, I made my way back to the bank and stood on the stone floor, my cold wet clothes dripping under the soothing March sun, body renewed, spirit reborn, breathing delight and floating in heaven.

In turn, Yi slowly stepped in and made her way towards the center, but I didn't see her walking - I saw her dancing. Dancing with the river,

dancing with the universe, in sacred slowness, in Butoh, the dance of consciousness, her inner element. She spent a good 10 minutes merging with the world, taking three long dips, and coming back to the shore to stand alongside me. We couldn't help but to go in one last time, this time side by side, holding hands as we faced this new chapter in our lives.

I can't express the awe of touching Ganga for the first time... They say that dipping into the Ganga washes away all remorse from the past. True statement or false belief? Well, both. If we disbelieve it, it'll have no effect whatsoever. And if we choose to, it can be life-changing. Like everything, actually.

For us it was true. This was a new beginning for both, that started by consciously letting go of all negativity that had occurred during the trip, and holding on to the wisdom. I made a vow never to forget the qualities and virtues that manifested in Yi during the trip, and to embody them myself in the coming episode of my life.

She taught me the art of giving, and all kinds of subtle ways to get others to accept our gifts. She showed me the ability to donate every last rupee to someone in need without a trace of worry about her own survival. But also that giving money, no matter how poor they are, only brings a fraction of the benefit of giving happiness, genuine compassion, goodwill. She taught me a commitment to truth at all costs, even when that meant going against our own well-being. A wish to act for the good of all, that underlies every other wish... and finally, she showed me the shameless ability to answer a straight "Yes!" to the question "would you like some more?" casually asked during an offered meal.

If only to honor our path together, it was my duty, from this day on, to embody everything she had brought into my experience of life.

As agreed, this new chapter started with our parting, taking different paths, giving time and space for the dust to settle, the truth to sink in

after such a meaningful journey together. Let's see how we are apart, let's see where our paths lead us, let's turn our focus inwards and find out who we are after this transformative month.

Thus our roads parted, as I stayed seated by the Ganga and Yi headed off towards Harki Pori, the central square of Kumbha Mela, a small island on the Ganga. I chose to contrast with the intensity of this previous week by spending the rest of the day sitting by the water, doing nothing. I reflected on the end of this chapter and everything I learned during. The ultimate sitting back, lying back, *shavasana* - meditation as a corpse. So many conditions had aligned to allow us to complete the walk that it felt divine.

As the evening drew in I was still seated by the Ganga: I made it my *tapasya* - self-imposed rule, not to leave my assan until tomorrow, not to go anywhere else than the water straight in front of me.

And as I was sitting around, a man appeared with a bag which he presented to me without

any other notice. Wordlessly, he opened it and withdrew two woks. I felt contrived to break the silence so I asked him blandly "So... are these woks?" "Yup" He answered matter-of-factly. "You can cook anything you want with them. Super handy!" Those were his last words as he packed them away and started walking through the shallow part of Ganga, disappearing into the distance. Maybe a message from God that I hadn't yet grasped? Or maybe just a man walking with a bag of woks.

Sitting on my assan by the river, sometimes I would also get visits from an Indian layperson or a Baba living in a neighboring cloth tent. They would come to me with a chillum or a jug of hot milk, with invitations for dinner or for the night in one of their Baba tents. I thanked them, but I had already decided to spend the night alone, under the stars, in contemplation.

It happened well, but as feared the previous night, mosquitoes were thriving and this time I couldn't hang the net, so there was nothing I

could really do about it except observe the pain and do my best to meditate.

Day 25

March 21st

Today's mission was to find the Gurus that my mom had been in contact with ever since she went to the previous Kumbha Mela several years ago near Varanasi. She had been meaning to come to this Kumbha Mela as well and meet me here, in fact that was the reason that triggered my decision to come in the first place: let's meet mom for the first time in 2 years amidst a crazy Hindu gathering! But the lockdown situation due to covid has been denying all tourist visas for over a year and made it impossible for her to even consider coming to India.

So instead I would go myself to meet her Baba friends, also a chance to digitally talk to her for the first time since the beginning of the Sadhu trip, as they all had phones and would certainly love to make a group call. So after receiving chai, samosa, and dried mango by the

neighboring Baba camp, I made my way to the center *Harki Pori* on a quest to meet mom's friends.

As I was pushing through the hectic crowd that defined the epicenter of this nation-wide gathering, Gautam Khattar, a friendly journalist from Haridwar, noticed something unusual about me and chose to introduce himself. When I asked why, amongst such a crowd of Sadhus, would he come to me, he answered he could sense something special. We had a good time, talking about my walking trip, my origins, my purpose on the path... As I was asked my name I answered my usual *Ben Bawa*, the nickname I had come to use when introducing myself to Hindi speakers. *Bawa* was a nickname given to me by my rapping Indian friends in Dharamshala half a year back, and means "bro" in Himachali slang, conveying a sense of brotherly closeness. I liked it, it made people smile.

But there was somewhat of a misunderstanding. I didn't know at the time... but later came to realize I had become Ben *Baba* instead. Interviews flourished and in no time everyone I met was calling me Ben Baba. Should I have spent my time trying to correct them, explaining the misunderstanding? That I was just a humble brother and not some high father figure? But the whole thing was kind of funny and my mom even came to call it my initiation name, given to me not by a Guru but by the Indian subcontinent.

And thus it came to pass... that due to an oral misunderstanding followed by a social-media avalanche, my name became Ben Baba. I decided to go with the flow and accept it with a laugh. After all, aren't all legit names defined by someone else?

Anyway back to the story. I needed to use someone's phone to make a call and I saw the interview as the perfect chance to ask for this favor. So I called Sukhveer, my mom's friend

and host for Kumbha Mela, who told me he wasn't in town today but his Baba was. He gave me the name of the Baba camp where I should go, but before venturing out to find it, I wanted to find a *langar* - free community kitchens run by temples for Sadhus and laypeople, where I was hoping to have at least one proper meal in the day. So I was guided left, I was guided right... and as I walked through a settlement of tents, I noticed an entirely gray-white Baba with a look as iconic as one of those ornamented Krishna statues we find in temples.

He was covered in ashes and nearly naked - unless you consider the dozens of rosary garlands covering his body to be a form of clothing. Wordlessly, he pointed me to come. He withdrew a smartphone and turned the screen towards me. His first words startled me. "Ye apka ma, hai na? This is your mom, right?"

The picture he was showing was indeed my mom, alongside him. His wordless approach, unmoving face, and seemingly mystic abilities

had me entirely speechless. I would never have believed our first encounter would happen like this.

So ash-covered rosary-garland Vashisht Giri immediately took me as his son. "No need to go anywhere" he would often say with a smile. "Everything we need simply comes to us." I was hosted in his Baba tent, told I could live here as long as I wanted, with meals from the langar and baths in the Ganga. I spent the rest of the day sitting like him, learning wordlessly, taking a dip into his lifestyle of presence and calmness as he gave blessings and *tillaks* - forehead marks, to hundreds of passers-by.

Physically, he didn't move much: I even saw it as a tapasya of stillness, sitting for so many long hours with the sole purpose of blessing those who visit. But very far from laziness, this kind of imposed stillness was actually undeniably harder than movement, which I too vividly saw for myself: after almost a month of continuous walking, I was now being made to

sit still all day and asked not to go anywhere. Hey, it wasn't easy! I struggled to pin my mind down and observed how it was affected by this immediate change in lifestyle.

As the afternoon unfolded we met a great number of Babas who came for visits, blessings, chai, chillum, or just to share a moment of presence. I didn't move and neither did Garland-clad Vashisht Giri, save for a one-minute walk to the langar where we had dinner together.

At some point in the Baba tent I reflected on the benefits of Yoga, its close link to Hinduism, and I had an inner calling, a yogic craving: I wanted the blood to flow. I really felt like getting on my head.

We had about ten Babas socializing around the Dhuni at the time and I only had space enough to sit. A headstand doesn't require much space but if I was to lose balance, I would either injure a senior Baba or crash into the sacred fire. But I was so tempted that I still asked

Garland Vashisht Giri. "Vashisht Giri Guruji... is it ok if... if I stand on my head? Just here?"

As was often the case, he didn't answer in words, but his body language suggested he wasn't entirely convinced by the idea. Still, it wasn't a flat refusal either, and I chose to do it. I shyly and slowly went into *Sirsasana*, the headstand, which I maintained for about 5 minutes, praying to God and to my own uninterrupted awareness that I wouldn't fall, hurt anyone and make a scandal on my first day...

It worked. I felt great, my entire system was flushed with blood and energy, I came back down slowly, and rested my neck. As soon as I brought my head back up, Vashisht Giri was waiting with folded orange fabric in his hands, which he casually tossed to me. I had no idea from where he manifested these clothes but this looked like some kind of initiation, being given Sadhu's clothing by one's Guru. I think he really liked my headstand, I laughed to myself!

My night in Vashisht Giri's tent felt a bit constrained compared to the openness of sleeping under the stars by the Ganga, but thanks to the Dhuni - our central fire and constant companion, lit through the day and much of the night, the space was entirely mosquito-free. A huge relief for me, and I slept like a log.

Day 26

March 22nd

I started the day with a shanti morning eating papaya with Vashisht Giri, after which I finally met Sukhveer: we had been talking about it for over a year. He looked different from the photos but I recognized his voice with certainty. I call him the coordinator: my connection to my mom's Babas was entirely thanks to him as he was the one maintaining contact between all three of us during these past years, ever since the previous Kumbha Mela.

We left *Juna Akhara* together, the tent village where I was staying, and he took me around town to countless other *Akharas* - different communities associated to their respective schools of Hinduism, and everything happened at such a fast pace I had a hard time keeping up. We met countless Babas with countless mindsets, but always the same hospitality, and the same suggestion of "Chai? Chillum?"

The last place we reached was the most special. A temple dedicated to *Hanuman* - the monkey god, and Milmil Baba, a Yogi whose statues and portraits always depict in lotus position, eyes half-open, gazing in the distance in solemn meditative absorption.

It was a homely, down-to-earth settlement of clay and bamboo in the midst of an exotic jungle setting which happened to be straight in a tiger reserve. It felt so remote we could hardly believe this was 10 minutes' walk from the Kumbha Mela.

Sukhveer and I walked in and met Nanda Giri, the most smiling Baba I had ever seen, sitting on a slightly raised area behind the fire which defines the "throne" of the temple's head Baba. Smiling, he invited us to sit. Smiling, he offered chai. Smiling, he offered chillum. He was so light and easy-going it felt like speaking to an old friend from high-school.

After a bit of light-mooded conversation, another Baba walked in. To my surprise, Smile Baba immediately stood and changed seats to make space for the coming Guru, who casually took the throne. It was none other than Thanapati Gananand Giri who my mom came to know two years ago, teacher of Vashisht Giri who hosted me yesterday, teacher of Smile Baba, and possibly the most esteemed Guru I had yet to meet. His movement was firm but graceful, with a calm gaze that seemed to hide an ocean of wisdom.

He was well versed in *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*, the one chosen book I brought with me on this

trip, and he knew countless *asanas* - Yoga postures, a good part of the reason I was here... so I came to nickname him Yogi Baba. I internally expressed the wish to learn under him, and not long after my secret decision he read my mind and phrased it out himself, suggesting to be my Guru. I gladly accepted and was given the name Brahmachari Ben Giri. Brahmachari is an esteemed status in Hinduism that is often believed to mean chastity. But looking into the texts, the original meaning is much subtler than that, and defines someone who acts out of selfless love rather than personal desire, especially in regard to relationships. He didn't give me that name for no reason and I could feel its significance in the new chapter of my life.

Day 27

March 23rd

The day started with a task that would have been mundane in everyday life, but as a begging Sadhu it took a very new dimension: in order to fulfill an urgent family contract for our Yoga center back home in Switzerland, I needed my passport scanned in color, signed with a blue pen, put in an envelope, and sent by speed post to a notary in Switzerland. These steps sound so simple, but I didn't have any of these things... and how to even pay for them?

When I finally got everything together with the invaluable help of Sukhveer, sending the letter cost one thousand rupees, equivalent to 13 dollars, almost all the money I had earned during a month of donations. Money takes a different dimension when we earn like the locals. Without a hint of exaggeration, a single hour's work in an average Swiss bank is a whole month's wage here.

Task completed, Sukhveer and I went back to Hanuman Temple in the tiger reserve and spent a good amount of time listening to the teachings. My Hindi's far from perfect and some Babas I've spent time with spoke in ways I hardly understood, but Yogi Gananand Giri's talking style was different, simple and clear, as if tailored for my level in Hindi. He was good at sensing me and would sometimes speak on my behalf in front of other Babas, successfully reading my mind. Some of his comments were very penetrating, and so were the silences in between. At some point, he broke a long silence with a query. "So, Ben Giri, tell me... What is it you're looking for? You came here, to Kumbha Mela, to our Temple.... What are you here for?"

Such a simple question created layers upon layers of investigation in my mind. Should I answer with something generic like *moksha*, liberation? No, I can do better than that... should I make a list of what I'm hoping to learn here? Yoga, meditation, and so on... Look

deeper... after a bit of time the answer came clearly.

"Peace" I replied. "Inner peace."

As soon as I phrased these words, inner peace was in fact created. I realized I already had what I was looking for. This interaction struck me so much that I had the thought "That's it, I'm convinced, he's my Guru."

Before going to sleep, we had a conversation about money, which ended with "Some have it, some don't. Feel free to sleep, eat, and follow the teachings here without anything in return, and for as long as you want." This further deepened my faith in him and my will to help in every way possible, even a hefty donation upon my return home in Dharamshala.

Day 28

March 24th

Morning with Yogi Gananand Giri at Hanuman Temple was very peaceful. He explained a few asanas, went through some of the unwritten rules and codes of conduct for Sadhus, which included one I had broken already: not publicly bathing naked in the Ganga unless one has reached the appropriate status of *Naga*. Interesting, how being naked in public is the mark of a learned Guru rather than a sign of poverty or insanity like it would be in the west. As Yogi Gananand Giri went on, I realized that the Sadhu world was more codified than I had thought, and I was breaking quite a few of their other rules as well.

Today's most important task was to meet Yi. Phonelessly, of course. She had told me some days ago she found a circle of Agoris in the upper *ghats* of Haridwar - the large stairs leading into the river, and was living with them

for the time being. She told me she felt a real connection, and somehow we both always knew it - her attraction towards Butoh was of the same nature, to break free from society's conventions, taboos, fixed rules, and instead listen to one's own deeper self. I was so glad she had found a nest and hoped she was still living there as I made my way up the Ganga with Sukhveer. Fair enough, as soon as we reached the Shamshan Ghats - the Agori's chosen living space alongside the funeral pyres where bodies were burnt day and night to be given to the Ganga, Yi appeared meditating under a tree, incarnating the Buddha in every way: her glow of presence, her perfect posture, her absolute stillness, her peaceful face... Seated around her were a few Agoris dressed in black that I happened to have met already on my first days here. They were socializing with each other but her stillness was unperturbed, a serenity impartial to the world around.

I quietly came closer and sat next to her under the tree. It didn't take long for her to sense me and turn her head with grace, connecting her eyes with mine. I could see she was immersed in awareness and doing very well. Her being was so elevated it almost made me feel small.

After sharing food, thoughts, emotions, and awareness on a paradise bank of upper Ganga that Yi had come to know, I came to the conclusion that I still needed space to settle down and our paths wouldn't join just yet. She was so understanding, all-embracing, that it made me wonder if after all this hustle and social life, do I really need space for myself or just some therapeutic time with Yi?

That same evening back home, my relation with Gananand Giri took an interesting twist. We were talking about initiation... that was the plan: to go through the ritual of learning to wear the robes I had been given already, officially going by the name of Brahmachari Ben Giri, vowing not to take any other Guru as my

own and to answer people's queries by "I belong to Juna Akhara under Thanapati Gananand Giri."

The ritual would involve quite a few more things which I all found interesting and none of which I took too personally: I'm not selling my soul to anyone, I told myself. None of this is carved on rock and irreversible, but rather an experiment on fully diving into a new way of life.

But as we went deeper into the conversation, one aspect did start to trouble me a bit: money. He seemed to be mentioning it more and more as we talked about initiation, to the point where he literally told me "In the Sadhu culture, we have a symbolic donation made to the Guru upon initiation. I know you're a wandering monk, a beggar, but once you get home, can you maybe make, hmm, a 500 dollar donation, for example?"

Until now, every relation I've had as a Sadhu was free from questions about money or

payment, because people saw I was a wandering beggar. What could they expect from me? Anything they gave me had to be purely selfless, which is what made the magic of my monk status.

But this time was different, and he was thinking long-term. His question was even more surprising considering I had just given 200 rupees, my entire day's receivings from my almsbowl. By the end of the evening and my final meditation, I came to the conclusion that I loved my Guru and was building a very touching relation, but I wouldn't see him as "my Guru" anymore. Rather, a close friend and a dear teacher. I folded the orange fabric away and internally decided I wouldn't be taking Sanyas, initiation. I'd rather keep learning from everyone and hold true to my values.

Day 29

March 25th

Gananand Giri came to me in the morning and cheerily told me "Come, I'll show you how to wash!" The question was a bit funny, but I didn't mind some valuable one-on-one Guru time, and after all, he had told me some days ago he would be teaching me to do everything like a Sadhu... So he took a cloth, a metal jug, and told me to bring my *Gamcha* - a rough thin cotton towel very common in India. And we started walking into the jungle past the point I thought was forbidden by the tiger reserve rules. We even got quite a bit deeper, until I was wondering if we were really going to wash or if he just wanted to take me on a walk.

But finally we got there, a white sandy dry riverbank with a pool of water that seemed to have been dug by previous Sadhus. This place was paradise. And his trust in me seemed to be building, because despite the lions, tigers, and elephants known to wander around here, he told me I could come back whenever I wanted to, even on my own.

Sukhveer was waiting for me as we came back to the temple. He had been talking about inviting me to his home for over one year, and now that we were "only" 150 kilometers away, he was really starting to insist. I'd obviously rather avoid transport in any form, and the reason I was here was to be here, in Kumbha Mela, with no desire to go anywhere else. But I felt like after everything he had done for me, everything the world has done for me, today something was being asked instead of given... this was a sacrifice I could make. I accepted the fact we would go on his bike, and I stayed true to my self-imposed rules about temporary transport:

- a) Wherever it brings me, it must also bring me back to the exact same point that I previously reached on foot.
- b) The purpose of this exception is purely to help someone, not for personal motives.

So I agreed to undertake the 5-hour trip by bike to meet his family and visit his mango and sugar-cane farms.

My whole trip was helmetless and dressed in thin Sadhu robes, so if we crashed I was obviously in for a rough time. I would also be making the headlines with "Famous walking Baba in hospital after crashing on bike", but I think I had God's approval on this one, as I was really doing something selfless, out of goodwill.

Day 30

March 26th

I spent one meditative day in Sukhveer's mango farm. We walked around acres of sugar cane fields, wheat fields, and I bathed in the coolness of his well. I spent time with his family and they served me generously, everything was homemade and of the highest quality: milk, yogurt, *ghee* (Indian clarified butter), and halva from his buffaloes... Chapati flatbread from his own wheat plants, cane juice and jaggery from his sugarcane fields.

All in all a most beautiful time with the family, where they shared their home while I shared my Yoga routines with them.

Day 31

March 27th

I chose to hitchhike my way back instead of Sukhveer's bike. It was my first experience hitching a ride as a Sadhu, and I was excited to see what it would be like.

What happened was completely beyond my expectations: I never waited for even ten minutes. Not only the rides were free, but I got food, drinks, and money offered all along the way. It was so smooth that I made it faster than the way there on Sukhveer's bike!

Back in Haridwar, I was relieved to be connected with the ground, back in my element, once again on foot, and vowed not to take that bike anymore. I was enchanted once again by the Ganga but a bit overwhelmed by the fame that had been growing ever since the first interview. It was hard just to cross the street without a selfie, a stack of questions and an invitation for chai. As loving as it was, my brain

would get tired at some point, thinking I'd rather have 5 minutes of silence than one hundred chais.

Funnily enough, that's when I met a Muni Baba from Russia, what a relief! *Muni* meaning silent, here was one person whose company I could enjoy without needing to speak! We walked on for a bit, but even though he had *Muni* in his title, he was making every effort to communicate, with sign language, pen and paper, lip reading, it never stopped... Bummer, I thought with a laugh inside, even a *Muni* can't leave me in silence! So after half an hour I took leave from him saying I needed to be alone. He didn't understand.

I proceeded to walk my way up the Ganga, dreaming of the quiet shore Yi had shown me a few days back. After a bit of trial and error I found the place in the dark. I thought about settling my mat, but something terribly attracted me to that Baba tent along the Ganga, just a spit away... So I followed my gut feeling,

and I was heartily greeted by an "Om Nama Shivaya!" as I took off my shoes and started making my way up the stone path.

This Baba was unlike anything I'd ever seen. His body sculpted like a roman statue, his skin smooth like a child's, his posture straight like the Buddha, his face shining like those beautified portraits they make of Shiva. Altogether he looked unreal: more godly than human.

Trying to put a finger on him, I asked my first question: his age. He answered saying he was 85. It was hard to believe, but what wasn't? This guy was otherworldly. So I asked him the secret behind such a body at such an age. He answered he was 85, but still a baby.

"Do you do Yoga, or martial arts, Kalaripayatt maybe?" I proceeded. As Babas often love to, he gave the answer wordlessly. With a little dance and a smiling face.

"Ok, so tell me, how many times to you eat per day?" This time he answered straight. "25."

I was a bit confused. "25 times per day?" I asked. "Per year" he answered.

Now I was dumbstruck. But I saw the result in front of my eyes, and it was undeniable: his picture perfect langot - Sadhu's minimal underwear, and otherwise naked body delineated the shape of a young athlete, his white beard being the only testimonial that he wasn't in his twenties.

"It depends on the months" he added. "I have one meal every 12 days, or 10 days, or 15 days... and otherwise I live from *Prana* - universal energy. I drink Ganga water, I breathe air, I absorb sunlight! And I smoke my chillum with light hemp, just the leaves."

His enthusiasm was boundless. But despite his joyous smile, he marked his words that he wasn't a thoughtlessly peaceful guy. "Everyone is my friend" he once said, "but if the police or

something wants to mess with me..." jumping up into a Kung Fu stance, he exclaimed in funny Indianized English: "FAST SERVICE!"

I got it. I wouldn't mess with him even if I was from the police. This guy had Shiva on his side.

He made me laugh on many other occasions. But he was also warm and caring: when he had first greeted me, regardless of his elevated status, he instantly stood up and prepared a large cup of sweet-milk coffee with a plate of salty crips-fries. I was grateful, as that was my only dinner. He wouldn't have any himself, of course, and his one assistant Vedansh wouldn't either.

Vedansh was extremely courteous and devoted, but he was just a man, like me. And until now I thought I was a good Yogi, but just here I felt fat, weak, almost crippled beside this Baba from another world.

When I asked, he told me he had no name, but upon insisting I managed to get an answer: *Shri*

Shri Ek-Saw-At Shivratri Muni. I was quick to write it down.

He even ended the night by inviting me to sleep here. I politely declined and answered I would sleep elsewhere by the Ganga.

So after these numerous days of social exhaustion, between selfie sessions and interviews, God sent me exactly what I needed: this guy was my therapy, my spiritual food. I was grateful beyond words and now was my time to digest. I bowed to him, received blessings, laid one hundred rupees at his feet but would have given one thousand, and made my way along the Ganga until I found a quiet spot under a tree where I could hang my mosquito net. They were coming in swarms and I couldn't imagine my night without it. They hadn't seemed to even get near Shivratri Baba, though, as if he was invisible. Maybe he is invisible. Just an appearance in my own mind...

Day 32

March 28th

Today was the first day of Holi, the yearly Indian celebration of colors, of life, of laughing and dancing. The idea was to burn away all negativity, ego, anger, hate, and worry from last year, and be reborn from their ashes. In my case, the symbolism would turn out to be very well served.

After waking up to the scarlet sunrise by the Ganga, I made my way to the Agori camp, Yi's new family. The Agoris are known to be followers of darkness, worshippers of death, notorious for breaking taboos and basically any rules set by society, and by reputation most Indians advise caution when visiting. But face to face, I learned very fast that these guys aren't just free from conventional taboos, they're also full of love. Myths and media tend to make everything dramatic... but my beloved *Mahabir* was a teddy bear, with a big bearded

smile, a warm boundless heart, a garland of skulls around his neck, and entirely black robes.

He would seize any chance to goof around and would raise the vibes in any situation. He was dear to both Yi and I, and he understood us perfectly. His smile was only rivaled by that of Shivismuni Baba, an equally all-black Agori Muni who had been in silence for thirteen years, but so brightly expressive his presence penetrated everything. The only sounds coming from his mouth were occasional fits of giggling and the loudest burps, that he would do on demand to enhance his otherwise wordless impersonations.

My favorite instance was when he explained to me, through body language and pointing to the funeral pyre, that he sometimes ate roasted human flesh. He followed his act by a loud burp and an expressive giggle. The first-ever speechless comedian, I thought to myself. Who also happens to eat dead people.

I was then told by the Agori community that I was welcome to join their ceremony on death

that same evening by the burning bodies, at 12 pm under the full moon on the first night of Holi. Hard to refuse!

I happily stuck around until late night to have a chance to attend it. Spending time at the camp, I learned a lot and came to realize the Agori world also had its set of rules, followed with scrutiny. It started by a wrong initiative of mine: I had noticed Mahakal the Head Baba drip some chai into the fire as a first offering before having his own share. So when at some point I was given a slice of tomato by a fellow Agori, I removed a small bit to donate to the fire. But my act, which I thought wholesome, was followed by a circle of shocked faces.

"Oh..." I answered shyly, "I shouldn't do that?" "*Bilkul nahi.* Absolutely not." Mahakal answered sharply. "Only the main Guru offers to the holy fire." "Ok, sorry... and thank you for instructing me."

"Second thing: you don't say *thank you*. You say *Adesh*" "Ok, sorry. *Adesh.*"

Adesh can be said to mean the eternal unity between the mundane "I" and the supreme soul: the "lower" self and higher self. But it's also the chosen Agori greeting and has a thousand other purposes, a word very dear to them that I've come to love. You could express anything you want just with this one word.

An hour or so before the ceremony, I came face to face with Agori mother Yogeshwar Mataji, the highest positioned in this camp, and strikingly, well, a woman. At that moment I scolded in my mind whoever told me the Agoris could be disrespectful - this was the most respect I'd ever seen! I had never yet seen a woman at the head of any Akhara or Baba community. And given this much power, this much esteem...

She was also the one who took Yi in as her daughter ever since her first arrival in the Agori camp. She offered lodging, food, guidance, and endless motherly care. Mataji also blessed Yi with an Indian name, Shivaniya Yogeshwari, by which she would become known quite fast.

So Agori Mataji started the ceremony at 11 pm, chanting "Svaha" repeatedly for around twenty minutes in a call-and-response style with the ten or so Agoris around. At every chant, she would throw a specific portion of grain, rice, spices, flowers, or various other offerings into the Dhuni, the holy fire, as we sat there watching the flames crackle expressively like a living being.

Some other rituals followed, after which Mataji picked up her polished human skull and led us across the bridge to the funeral pyre. A body had nearly finished burning, delineated by a few bones sticking out from a large pile of ashes. The Agoris added more wood to liven the fire and started a long meditative ritual where they throw in flowers, lemons, alcohol, and all kinds of offerings. "This is the end of life..." Mataji would say in perfect English with a subtle smile.

After an hour-long meditative contemplation, we were told to stand and Mataji waved Yi and

me to come. After mixing purple coloring with the ashes from the previously burnt body, she grabbed a handful and smeared it on my forehead, my hair, my arms. "Happy Holi!" she exclaimed with joy. "This is the real Holi."

I contemplated the ashes smeared over my body and thought of where they came from. This *was* real Holi. In terms of burning away the past, recognizing it as dead, and facing the future with joy - this was pretty spot on. After her cheery comments the mood completely changed, everyone started throwing colors and hugging each other. A few chillums went around and the Agoris went on to drink alcohol from the halved human skull of God knows who.

The evening ended around 2 am when we got back to camp. I was facing the fire, sitting cross-legged beside Yi, and we chilled under the full moon, in meditation, in well being. Awareness prevailed, we were one, and we didn't feel the slightest need to fill such a beautiful silence with discussion. We only

expressed to each other the gratitude of having been through such an experience together, and went to sleep facing the fire. Adesh.

Day 33

March 29th

Last night finished late and I only got a few hours' sleep before morning activity started in the Agori camp. My eyes were hardly open when I noticed Yi take her bag and leave. I assumed she was off for morning meditation on the upper banks, until I found a letter wrapped in yellow cloth and beautifully knotted. A very touching message expressing the gratitude of everything we experienced together this past month... Signed, Shivaniya.

I reflect on how much this path together had changed us. Every day of this inner and outer journey was so rich, the depth was fathomless. Along with the message came the Chinese knot I had made for her birthday, symbolizing the balance between togetherness and aloneness. There was also one thousand rupees in the form of two bills that had been folded origami-style into paper hearts. For a begging Sadhu, that's a

big amount of money. It can take weeks to receive that much... Although it wasn't clearly stated, that message could have been a goodbye letter, and in that case a pretty classy way to say it. Let's embrace the universe and see what it has in store...

The rest of the day was filled with the joy of celebrating Holi, colors playfully smeared on my face every five minutes by passers-by along with cheery *Happy Holi*'s, selfie sessions, and every once in a while water balloons thrown from roofs that give quite a shock when you don't expect them.

But a faint sadness lingered on at the thought I might not be seeing Shivaniya until my return in Dharamshala. And even there, who knows... Anyway, calculating made no sense and that's what made the beauty of our nomadic lives. Actually, of life in general.

In mid-afternoon I made my way to Vishnoi Temple where I had been invited the previous day for Holi. For some reason, I was

immediately made to sit at the same area as the head Baba. I answered the same questions, I gave the same blessings. And I did my best to keep my ego out of it: it's not about fame, it's about being in a position where I can bring brightness to someone's life, so let's do our best to go that way. It made for a touching experience with the people, who shared some deeply ingrained personal issues. I taught some meditation, played some *Bhakti* - devotional music, on their harmonium, and answered questions about *Dharma* - the spiritual path.

After these five days of absence, my arrival back home in Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple came with mixed reactions. Most people greeted me with big smiles, hugs, and an honorific "Brahmachari Ben Giri!", but my own Gananand Giri not so. He smiled and laughed a bit at my prostration upon seeing him again... but after a few minutes of exchanging other topics with the Babas, he turned back to me with a stern face. "So you're gone for five days, and you don't tell

anyone where you are? Wandering around, left and right, not considering your own temple or Guru, who feed you, who do everything for you?"

"I was sleeping by the Ganga. I needed meditation." I answered calmly. He laughed a bit, lightening the mood. "Ok ok, but anyway, don't do it again. If you're gonna live here, you're gonna live here. Go wherever you wish during the day, but come back for the night. Dinner will always be served for you by Nanda Giri."

Nanda Giri, which I nickname Smile Baba after his infinite joy, was Hanuman Temple's permanent Baba. This was his home, which he had built himself many years back. Yet despite his high rank he was also the one cooking every night, often just for the two of us. The kitchen was nothing more than a flat gas stove set directly on the earthen floor with a few pots lying around and a small plastic shelf of spices. Sitting on the floor, with one tiny knife, no

cutting board, no running water.... and yet his food was so exceptional that I was always sorry I hadn't been staring at him during the whole process. But I think the most important ingredients were love, joy, attention, and care. The sum of these qualities, in the Hindu Baba world we would call *anand*. I think that's Smile Baba's favorite word, by the way, and always his answer to the question "How are you?"

But not to change the subject: I accepted Gananand Giri's condition, glad to be on the same page again. And it's not the first time I notice Gurus being "possessive" over their students, not really liking them to stick around other Babas. An *all-or-nothing* type of attitude.

Day 34

March 30th

I didn't wake up too well. Half of my night was sleepless, struggling with mosquitoes. I could feel I was nearing sickness, with a weak body and low immune system. So low, that I feared I might have an infection, near my perineum, called *Staph* - a bacteria that threatened my life last monsoon already, 9 months ago, in the tropical heat of Indian Punjab. It starts like a pimple, but considerably bigger than acne and slightly painful... and it can get really bad really fast. Last time, it led to a 10'000 rupee surgery and one month's hospital visits. I currently have 800 rupees in my bag.

The morning started with chai and light conversation, after which Smile Baba's face turned a bit more serious. "Last night, after you went to bed, I saw a tiger from camp. I hope you're being extra careful. Don't go anywhere at night."

I recalled last night's comical situation where I had to make the inner choice between going to bed sticky, or taking my bottle-shower in the jungle and risking meeting a tiger. It was a hard one. I chose the shower.

He went on to tell me he had built this temple in the tiger reserve on purpose. He jokingly called himself *Tiger Baba*. Durga Mata, a female deity on the temple's altar, is also always portrayed sitting on a tiger. Tiger Smile Baba added that personally, he had no fear, and also knew a few tricks. At night, tigers tend to stay away from light, especially orange light - the sacred fire. They don't like the orange color to begin with, so it perfectly suits orange-robed Sadhus like Smile Baba. And they tend to attack smaller things than humans, but "tend to" is not enough when it comes to survival. I liked the conversation so much that I was writing down the points in my book as he spoke.

About that, I'm spending more than one hour daily to write this journal by hand. Finding the

needed private time and space within such a social life is a bit challenging, so sometimes I get creative, pulling the book out between conversations around the fire, shutting my eyes to the Babas around me... or else lying on steps behind the Ganga, trying not to get noticed by selfie tourists... or else pretending to go to bed at the temple but instead pulling out my little journal to write the day's updates under my blanket.

Naturally my Baba family started getting curious, what in the world was I writing about? At some point in camp I was even asked "Is Nanda Giri in the book? Let's see what you wrote about him!" So I flipped to the appropriate page and started reading it out loud. They were so amused to see I book-named him Smile Baba that they started calling him the same. Nanda Giri happened to be sitting right there, and in response to his new name, who would have thought, his smile became even bigger!

Later in the evening, I came to know him even better, namely his relationship to money. Today I had just received 200 rupees from a layperson who came to our ashram, with whom I had guided a meditation. So as per the rules I set for myself, money received goes in priority to the temple I live in rather than for my own needs. So I tried to give them to Smile Baba but he refused. I then insisted, saying it's for milk, tea, food, and the countless other expenses involved in running such a temple... Finally he took it reluctantly, adding "I don't need money. Only God, prayer, meditation... Whatever food I have or don't have, I'm fine. So I don't expect money from you. Only *Prem*." *Prem* is a common word amongst Sadhus and can be translated as God-love. I was touched by his answer and he greatly rose in my esteem.

In the afternoon, I walked up the Ganga to possibly meet Shivaniya, or if not, at least her Agori family and get some updates. She wasn't there when I reached them but I was told she

wasn't that far away, and I was greeted with a sea of joy from the members.

I decided to wait in peace and meditation by the Ganga, but before I could start to sit I was prompted by journalists asking for an interview. Of course I agreed, I'd just postpone my meditation and bathe in the Ganga a bit later, not a big deal. So after 20 minutes, we were done and I saw them off, but more are waiting. Another 20 minutes with slightly repetitive questions... Ok, this time we're really done, finally, Mata Ganga, waiting for me, I can bathe before the sun sets...

But no, still another interview by a journalist, and finally a fourth one waiting in line by a news channel. The sun was setting now. I hadn't even touched the water yet, let alone meditation, and I was mentally exhausted. Somehow I manage to pull off a positive face for the last interview, but this showed me more clearly than ever the drawbacks of fame. Due to some kind of disorder in the human mind, most

people think that fame equals happiness. The world's famous people must surely be happy, or at least much better off than us common mortals. Duh!

But have we thought about it one minute? Can we find a single reason to back our belief about the correlation between fame and happiness? In my current daily life, so many people were stopping me for selfies, discussions, and interviews that my walking speed was cut in half. For example, to visit the Agori camp from my Hanuman Temple home, it would take anyone 45 minutes of walk, but for me it took one and a half hours. And instead of getting there peacefully in walking meditation, I arrived exhausted from the endless talking. Basically, however I planned my day I needed to double the time it took to do anything. No, fame didn't add to my personal well-being, that's a fact.

But another fact worth noting is that fame had put me in a position of great potential if I chose

to see it that way. The potential to change people's lives... If I took the whole story as a practice of Metta, selfless love, then every encounter, every interview, had the power to bring peace and brightness to a great number of people.

Having no phone, it was also the best way for me to share news with my own family back in the West. The published interviews were basically the only form of news they got, and it made a big difference: they might otherwise hardly have known I was alive, that's how little I was in touch with technology those days! Seen in this way, fame could be used not for personal benefit but as a holy practice that made others happy, and in return, I was fulfilled.

Day 35

March 31st

Today, another reality hit me about the occasional hardships of Sadhu life: being sick without money. The infection had considerably worsened, and by now I knew it was Staph. The epicenter was a purple-blue spot the size of a ping-pong ball near my perineum, a place I could hardly see with my own eyes. Yet I noticed it expanding at an alarming speed. Forget about the hospital, that would cost money. So instead of a prescription, I showed up at the pharmacy with a rough guess of the antibiotic they had given me last year.

But another issue was waiting... in a Sadhu life, you don't choose what you eat or what you drink: you enjoy whatever you're given. But on antibiotics, along with an already weak stomach, I had to be extra careful what I ingested. So I had to buy bottled water, disinfectant, and yogurt for its probiotics. I

knew I couldn't live like this very long on my beggar's income, but Shivaniya's donation a few days back made it possible for now, and this even added extra significance to the gift: I owed her my health, my well-being, my recovery. To be honest, my life would be at stake if I hadn't taken the right measures at the right time.

I spent the rest of the day meditating and keeping social life to a minimum to put all my attention into healing.

Day 36

April 1st

I woke up to an interviewer staring at me. He had already started filming before I opened my eyes from meditation... The following interview happened kind of smoothly, but obviously I wasn't not entirely there, nor did I entirely agree with his approach. As a side note, many months later I even came across a funny youtube comment made under that exact interview. "Leave Ben Baba alone! He's obviously tired of interviews and just wants to meditate." So my face did give it away!

After my morning Yoga, a bit of *seva* - volunteer work around camp, and happy socializing, Smile Baba asked me if I wanted to learn to wear the traditional Sadhu's robes. I loved his approach. He didn't say "you shall wear it from now on, disciple!", he just casually gave me the choice. I gladly accepted and came to think of it as an incognito initiation - not an official contract

that would define my status in the Baba society, but an inside pact between me and him. If I got to choose my Guru, he was the one. I truly loved him. *Prem. Anand.*

Getting used to wearing the robes during the rest of my day brought insight as to their original purpose. It seems Sadhu clothing is not so much defined by how you wear it, as by what exactly you're wearing: a plain, seamless, unsewn piece of fabric. By observing other Sadhus, it looked to me like you can do whatever you want with it as long as it's still in its raw unsewn state. What Smile Baba did to a roughly four-meter piece of orange fabric was to make an incision with a knife at one-third of its length, then tear it in a straight line with his hands. He wrapped one half around my waist like a lungi, and the other around my chest and shoulders. The whole thing took about 60 seconds.

Another crucial part was the underwear, called *langot* - I already had one gifted to me by

Shivaniya. It's a piece of clothing so deeply rooted in Indian culture and dear to Hindus that many Sadhus choose to wear only that. Yet Shivaniya had been wearing it for years, and her guidance was invaluable as she taught me how to make one at the beginning of the trip. Again, you start with a plain piece of fabric, this time 2.5 meters long and only 20 centimeters wide. You make one cut halfway down the middle and one knot, and you're done. You can make your entire set of clothing from raw fabric in 2 minutes, with no other equipment than a knife.

In comparison, the clothing I was previously wearing took me twenty hours. It was more convenient and comfortable, but not even that much, and I now saw the original purpose of wearing something so simple and easily replaceable: detachment. You don't really worry about what happens to your clothes anymore, dirt, oil, wear and tear, loss or theft... when you

can make a brand new set with 2 dollars and 2 minutes of work!

A good part of my day was spent at Juna Akhara, my two other Gurus' tent village, where Yogi Gananand Giri and Garland Vashisht Giri, both my mom's connections, spent most of their time. Armed with my new robes and status as an initiate, I had a great time observing the Guru-student relationship first-hand and the inner workings of the Sadhu community. I found Vashisht Giri to be too possessive for my liking, but I also took it lightly and usually laughed it off. When passers-by recognized me and asked for an interview, he initially refused, saying "Whatever you want to ask Ben Giri, just ask me. I am his Guru."

So the camera men proceeded awkwardly to ask him about my situation, my country, my family... he answered remarkably well, but still got stuck at some point and ended up telling them "Ok, whatever, you can ask him, but make it short."

All in all I wasn't that inspired by his attitude but I didn't mind, and didn't see him as my personal Guru either - rather, a dear friend who took great care of me. And who expressed himself with such equanimity that your mind would settle down just by looking at him. I still really liked this guy.

Most other Babas tended to show me utmost respect, possibly my new status coupled with the fact I was the only foreigner around. At the community kitchen, Sadhus are always given priority treatment compared to laypeople, but today I was given privileges even compared to other Sadhus, like sweets after the meal.

I felt like I was officially part of Shiva's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, fed like a Baba, lodged like a Baba, loved like a Baba. A truly unique experience in my life.

After leaving Juna Akhara, as I was settling my gaze on the Ganga in the afternoon sun, I seemed to offend a fellow Sadhu by my clothing. He came to me without a word of

introduction, instead greeting me with a "Are you initiated? You can't wear this color unless you're initiated."

"What do you mean by initiated?" I asked back curiously. "Initiated means a Guru gave you *Sanyas*. It means you will wear this forever."

"Will you wear it forever?" I asked teasingly. "Yes I will." "What about impermanence? Death? You're not going to die?" The tension was rising a bit in our exchange, and his tone started to be on the offensive. "I will never die. I'm already dead. *Sanyas* is death."

I thought about answering back but the futility of our exchange became so clear that I chose to cut the argument short and go back to facing the Ganga, in closed-eye meditation. For the first time he seemed to understand my answer. He apologized and left.

The evening ended with me sitting in Hanuman Temple's common space in slight despair, doing my best to wash away the stream of blood and

pus flowing out from the open wound on my perineum. I was trying to keep a low profile and didn't want to inflict my worries onto anyone else, but there was no such thing as a private space around here and at some point a fellow Baba walked in, whose face took a grave look as he saw the blood on my hand. Word got around fast and everyone wanted to help, offering money for the hospital. I declined their offers, knowing that financially they weren't any better off than I was and that hospitalization could be a serious expense, even in India. I insisted I would treat it myself.

This was a first-ever challenge in my life - I had obviously been sick before, but never moneyless and sick at the same time. I wasn't without fear, but instead of panicking I took it as a next-level lesson on self-healing.

A few hours later, after my nightly meditation, I couldn't resist the urge to have one last look. I pulled down my pants and what I saw was pretty ugly. A hard white piece of matter was

sticking out from the infected area, which I guessed was the mother of the infection. I disinfected my hands thoroughly and started pulling at it, trying to force it out... After a few minutes of struggling came a scream of pain followed by "Eureka!!" of relief. The entire white mess had been pulled out, covered in blood, leaving behind a gaping hole where the mother used to be. It felt like giving birth to a monster. I wouldn't be naming this one.

Day 37

April 2nd

The heart of the infection had been pulled out, but the open wound left behind kept oozing blood and pus and would have to be really well taken care of. I scraped it clean with a spoon and disinfectant, then bandaged it with whatever fabric I happened to have: my headscarf and some cotton given to me yesterday by the temple folks. It seemed to work.

As I made my way to Juna Akhara wearing my new Sadhu robes, amongst the countless encounters of joy and praise, I once again got one odd reaction. "Apka meuri kya hai? What's your Meuri?" My Hindi wasn't perfect and I asked for clarification. "Sorry, what does Meuri mean?" "You don't even know what Meuri means? So what's your Akhara?" "I'm learning under Juna Akhara. But names are just names. My Guru is God. My school is the world." He

looked really offended. "You're a shame to our Akhara" he answered with aversion.

I later came to know that *Meuri* refers to the caste system, by which humans are supposedly classified. Making the question even vainer than I thought! But I didn't mind, and stuck to the principle of *Satya* as proclaimed by my first ever Guru, Mahatma Gandhi. Truthfulness - to stick to what we believe is right regardless of public opinion or anyone's appraisal in the world. Speaking straight from the heart and having faith that this ultimately leads to good...which ironically tends to lead to even more appraisal from the world, as seen with Gandhi or Buddha or Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King.

In the morning, I spent some time with Hari Om Baba, one of the most huggable Babas in the Juna Akhara tent village. I had decided to visit him every day, sharing presence, doing my Yoga, being with his guests... Around noon, his assistant Paven Varti brought me to a *Langar* - a community kitchen, unlike any I had ever seen.

Instead of sitting on floor mats, people sat at private tables of two on western chairs. The space was impeccably clean, tables washed after every meal which consisted of no less than 8 items with endless refills, 5-star service with warm smiles, and tastes we would usually find in the best restaurants in town. I didn't know free Baba canteens could get this fancy. Thank you Hari Om Baba!

I made my way up the Ganga in the afternoon to meet the Agori family, this time at a slightly handicapped pace due to my wound. It made for a slow meditative walk and I enjoyed it.

As usual, quite a bit of attention was on me, but despite today's three interviews and countless encounters, I received a total of 10 rupees. And I spent more than that merely buying new cotton to bandage my wound...

Day 38

April 3rd

I woke up to an invitation by the folks at the neighboring temple, which I gladly accepted. We climbed the highest hill in Haridwar, overlooking miles and miles of Ganga's twists and turns. The summit was a sacred space which used to house Chamunda Temple, where my Guru's own Guru Milmil Baba taught when he was alive. They brought everything they needed to cook on a fireplace at the very top, and out of nothing they made the most amazing *kichari* - a saucy Indian rice dish. It was so casually made in such minimal conditions, I praise the skills of Indian Babas, who know so much more than mantras and rituals. They can really get around.

Afternoon was spent in Juna Akhara tent village and made for an interesting situation between my Babas: after I got a bit too much attention from passers-by, Vashisht Giri started to get

patronizing. "Hey, when laypeople take photos, don't do *pranam* unless they give you money."

Pranam basically means giving blessings, through hand gestures, eye contact, or touching their head, along with an internal prayer for their well-being. I obviously disagreed with him, and told him "Pranam is God. There is no correlation between God and money." He then answered back with his usual calm, equanimous face "Even to use the toilet, you need 5 rupees." "I don't have 5 rupees and I still pee." I said jokingly.

It may sound like an argument but the whole thing was light-hearted and smiling. However, Gananand Giri, Vashisht Giri's own guru who happened to be listening, completely changed the scene. He came to my defense and started scolding his student. "Listen, Ben Giri here has something unique, something new to bring to us all. Some of the tapasyas he did, like that walk across entire continents, none of us have done. So let's give him the freedom to be who he is." I

was both shocked and deeply touched. I didn't know what to think. Vashisht Giri reacted with his usual equanimous silence, staring into the distance.

Day 39

April 4th

In the morning I experimented with different ways to tie my robes in order to do my inverted Yoga, handstands, headstands, cartwheels... with varying success.

As I made my way to Juna Akhara in the afternoon I was approached by a young man who prostrated to me. "I saw you yesterday, giving money to a beggar. The way you moved, your presence, your smile... Seeing you just once changed my life, I swear. You are a Buddha to me."

As pleasant as they sound, these words weren't easy to deal with, even quite overwhelming. Yes, an indicator that I'm not on a wrong path, but this kind of energy coming at me was still a bit offsetting. I got away with it by saying that everything we say, praise or hate, is simply an expression of our own inner state, like a mirror. So whatever he saw in me was simply what he

already had in himself. He liked it and we parted happily.

When I reached Juna Akhara I was greeted by a pleasant surprise. To the left of Garland Vashisht Giri and his unusually big grin was Shivaniya, sitting there as if materialized from the ether. I didn't even know how she found the place... We greeted with a hearty laugh and I noticed she was already friends with my Babas. We sat together and had a memorable time of family connection. She was told she was most welcome in Smile Baba's Hanuman temple to spend the night with us. So she and I made our way there together, and as soon as Smile Baba noticed us from afar, he greeted us with an endearing "Thank you! I love! Yes. *Namoooooh Narayaan! Danyevad! Thank you!*"

This was smile Baba's iconic lingo, where he would skillfully put together his favorite words in English: every request, appreciation, appraisal, or well-wishing was replaced by "thank you". *Thank you* meant hello, goodbye,

you're welcome, yes please, no thanks, ok, and quite a few other things I had yet to pick up.

Shivaniya was greeted with great esteem and was instantly part of the family. All the temple's brothers showed up, invited for the special event... An exceptional dinner was made, and we were kept entertained for hours by conversation, chillum, chai, friends coming and going... She was given everything for the night and told she could stay as long as she wanted with no questions about payment. Personally, it was a joy to be united again and we had so much fun it was like a childhood sleepover.

Day 40

April 5th

Morning with Shivaniya was harmonious, doing *seva* - volunteer work around camp, after which she was seen off with the warmest blessings and returned to her Agori family.

The afternoon was spent at Juna Akhara tent village from one merry Baba invitation to another, receiving food, drinks, chai, blessings, and Vedic teachings.

As I reached Vashisht Giri's tent, however, which was initially my home, it looked like I wasn't so welcome anymore. I was attracting journalists everywhere I went and so much attention that it was creating problems for those close to me. At some point Vashisht Giri even ended up sending away journalists in anger. Maybe it was a sign my popularity had served its purpose, it was time to let things flow in their direction and make my way back home to

Northern India, eternally grateful for each and every experience here, but calling it a day...

After meeting a few more Babas, I bathed in the Ganga and made my way back to camp, where I met new faces, all joyful to see me. Journalists were also waiting and spent one hour interviewing me, after which a large family came to pay respect and give 500 rupees.

Day 41

April 6th

I woke up to even more interviews - four people and two cameras. They had initially asked for a Yoga lesson, which I gave with joy, but the whole thing turned out to be a filming session instead...

When they were gone I greeted Smile Baba good morning, and for the first time ever he wasn't smiling. "I got a call from our Juna Akhara. Hey, no more interviews in camp. Don't let journalists come into our temple anymore."

I perfectly understood, I was even relieved. After those few words, Smile Baba quickly came back to his usual *I love you's* and *thank you's* which made about half of his spoken content. I love you too, Smile Baba.

As I reached Juna Akhara, I saw Shivaniya casually sitting with my two Gurus. As usual when she was here, they smiled, they laughed, a joyful vibe permeated the air. Vashisht Giri

decided to video call my mom, in which we were all digitally united for the first time.

Our reunion was followed by an interview, this time not by a journalist but a fellow Baba, which lasted a whole hour as we all got prompted one after the other.

I then had a very meaningful talk with Gananand Giri. I told him I was leaving after-tomorrow to head back to Dharamshala on foot. But I had a few questions that could only be answered within a Guru-student relationship...

"Ask ahead" he said happily. "So... as I take the road on foot again, I want to honor everything I learned in my time here, and in that name I want to show respect to our Akhara, to the Sadhu lifestyle, to Hinduism, by adhering to its codes and customs. So how should I dress when I walk back? I'll be an independent wandering Sadhu again, should I still wear all-orange robes like now?"

"You're a free man. Dress however you wish. But if you want to make sure no one sees you as a fraud, as a fake, as a pretend-Baba, you can keep the orange top but the lungi's color, the skirt, should be white. White means you're not a formally initiated Sanyasi but what we call *Grhastha Rupi*, or *Grhastha Yogi*."

Grhastha means layperson, householder, so a *Grhastha Yogi* wouldn't necessarily be celibate, or initiated, or a complete renunciate of all worldly ties, but nonetheless fully on the path of Yoga, of Dharma, of meditation. I really liked the idea and the freedom it granted. Especially freedom to learn from anyone, any school or belief system without being tied to a specific sect or Guru or set of doctrines. It went hand in hand with my own assertion that everyone was my Guru, the world was my teacher in this school of life.

Back home, I painfully removed the bandage I had experimentally made from a headscarf and a cotton ball... and it turned out a complete

failure. The entire wound ended up glued to the cotton and was torn open again as I tried my best to remove it. Oh well.

I still had a joyful time laughing away with my Baba family at the temple. They asked me about the previous years of my trip, notably my walk through Pakistan.

"Isn't Pakistan dangerous? You didn't have any problems with Talibans, terrorists?" "Whatever we choose to label them, in the end everyone is human" I answered. "So if I see them as such, all these problems are cut at their root. Terrorists cease to exist. Enemies cease to exist. All we are left with, is a genuine human to human relationship."

They liked my answer so much that to honor my boundless love they chose to call me *Taliban Baba*. We laughed to tears at my new title. As much as I was touched by their affectionate consideration, I kind of hoped that name wouldn't stick.

Day 42

April 7th

My last full day at Kumbha Mela... and an entire day without a single interview. What a welcome break! I probably owed it to my Akhara who recently had made every effort they could to shoo away journalists. Today, no one was staring at me with a microphone and camera when I woke up... no other company than the chirping birds and the rising sun for my morning Yoga. What a feeling.

To honor yesterday's explanation on the Sadhu dress code, I went to the Baba cloth shop and tried to buy a white piece of fabric with the few bills I had left. But I failed at buying it, as a fellow Baba standing next to me decided to pay for it instead. It had even more significance now that it was the result of a direct donation...

I then had lunch at a Langar in the Juna Akhara tent village that I hadn't yet noticed. These various Baba-canteen experiences were one of

my favorite sides of this new life as a novice Sadhu. Every eatery was different, ranging from big and fancy to homely, family style, and completely hidden. But they invariably had the most amazing food, made with love, made with meditation, made with selfless service. *Prem.*

After food I visited Hari Om Baba one last time to say goodbye, and I sat one last time with my two godfathers Garland Vashisht Giri and Yogi Gananand Giri. We had an affectionate talk about my departure and I gift Gananand Giri the compass I'd been carrying since the beginning of my walking trip 5 years ago. He was really touched and admitted he didn't know how to use it, even after my explanations. "*Koy bat nahi.* It doesn't matter." I answered. "What counts is the gift."

I came back home to Hanuman Temple and Shivaniya visited to say goodbye to Smile Baba, before returning to her Agori Mother one last time. This was her last night as well: we had agreed we would leave Haridwar side by side.

Smile Baba was very affectionate on my last night. Not so much in words as in laughs and body language. He asked about my whole experience in Kumbha Mela and what I thought of the different Babas. I answered that I've met all kinds, but in the end he was my favorite.

He was so touched by my answer that he brought our incognito initiation one step further: he removed the rosary around his neck and placed it around mine. I smiled with my whole being.

Late in the night, Gananand Giri came back, also very affectionate towards me, and went to sleep repeating "*Mera beta, mera sunder beta...*"
My son, my beautiful son..."



Part III

The Silent Way Home

खामोश मुसाफिर

Day 43

April 8th

This was D-day. I didn't want to rush my way out so we had one last gathering, an intimate sharing of conversation, chai, and a chillum which I accepted even in the morning. Gananand Giri saw me off with 500 rupees. We all hugged, unconventional for a Guru-student relationship, but I really loved them both.

I spent the rest of the morning with my old friend Sukhveer who had expressed the wish to see me one last time. We then proceeded to meet Shivaniya as planned, at the Agori camp. Three interviews were requested from me, which I initially refused, saying we wanted to be off. After they insisted, I realize it could be a way to save into film these precious last moments with Shivaniya and the Agoris, as well as a selfless service I could do for the spectators... so I accepted.

The Agoris were even more loving than usual: Shivaniya's goodbye alone lasted more than an hour. Both head Gurus, Mahakal Baba and Lila Baba, were in tears, praising us and wishing us good fortune on the road.

On Shivaniya's goodbye, head Baba Mahakal didn't only touch her feet: he placed them in a brass basin and washed them with his own hands. I was already staring in astonishment, until he raised the water to his mouth and started drinking it! I really couldn't believe my eyes. I don't know all that happened between Shivaniya and the Agoris during these three weeks and we'd have to read her own journal for that, but the bond created was clearly unlike anything else.

Mahakal then sat beside me and slipped 500 rupees in my hand. I was so ashamed as I knew how minimal these people were - Shivaniya had observed them and had told me that much of what they owned was actually "stolen" from the dead. At the funeral pyre, after the bodies

turned to ashes and various offerings had been made by the people's relatives, the Agoris took over at midnight to retrieve whatever they could.

Unethical? I think not. And if so, great! That's Agori. It's far better than if those offerings went to waste, and thanks to that, offering to the dead also meant offering to the Agoris, worshippers of death.

After endless goodbyes we finally walked out of Kumbha Mela, making our way up the Ganga at a slow thoughtful pace. I wanted to tell her how I felt but it seemed impossible to put anything into words... the experience was too rich to be brought down to the level of my mind.

We were soon invited to a lovely Langar to have our first meal back on the road. It felt great and brought back pleasant memories... After the meal, an angel dressed in white led us to a quiet scene of raw nature by the Ganga where we set our camp in perfect harmony with the world.

Day 44

April 9th

We woke up just where we left off - paradise. And this picturesque river setting also gave us utmost privacy, hidden amongst the reeds. I was still wearing the entirely orange robes initially offered to me by my Gurus, but it was the last time... I made it a ritual to change my lungi skirt to white - this lowered my status and portrayed me as a novice instead of some seasoned Guru. It also made it apparent I didn't belong to any one fixed teacher. Actually, my secret initiation was with Smile Baba Nanou Giri, my closest pal, my favorite teacher, my incognito Guru, but I chose to keep it a humble pact between us rather than boasting it to all the other Babas and writing it on my résumé.

So white bottom and orange top it was, and for me it symbolized one step taken away from the formal world of *Guru-shish*, teacher-student, and one step towards a more common

layperson's life. Ideally, I wanted to make the best of both worlds and live in the middleness. Learn to apply the principles of Yogic spirituality into everyday life and not just in Juna Akhara surrounded by Babas. A lower status also meant that the respect I'd be paid would rely more on my inner qualities and less on my appearance.

The walk was pleasant, but it did take a bit of physical getting used to for both of us. That also meant getting used to the most unexpected diets defined by our karmas. In our case we were given so many sweets yesterday that it was the only thing we ate all morning, until our stomachs implored us to stop.

When you're a wandering beggar, you don't choose what you eat, remember? went the wise voice in my mind. And be happy were given Indian sweets and not Brussel sprouts! went the little kid.

We spent all day making our way towards Rishikesh, a dream destination for both of us

that just happened to be one day's walk away from Haridwar. We couldn't miss the chance to travel there on foot, nor the chance to spend at least one night together in such a famed holy place.

We reached Rishikesh's famous Ramjula Bridge at sunset, just in time for the fire ceremonies between the banks of Ganga and the pink sky. Our dreams of Rishikesh were fulfilled as we sat along the most peaceful Ghats we had ever seen... Shivaniya dove into an hour-long Butoh session, expressing herself wordlessly and connecting to the world, while I sank into the present, in moving meditation, Taichi... We were like newborns in a new world.

After our respective practices and sharing our mutual gratitude of being here, we packed our things and headed up the river. Let's find a place a bit more hidden to spend the night... We ended up on a sandy bank where we shared a portion of *Dahee Bole* - yogurt and chickpea salad, that had just been offered to us by a local

seller. During dinner we got a visit from the police, but it happened to be the friendliest cop we'd yet to meet. He actually, really, genuinely wanted our well-being. He told us that if we tried to stay here overnight, we'd end up flooded by the high tide that came around 3 am. Then he went on to praise us and expressed his gratitude towards Ganga, Shiva, and all Sadhus. He even ended up bringing ice cream that the three of us enjoyed together.

So Shivaniya and I gathered our things and moved to a sleeping place that happened to be even better, right by Ramjula bridge, sheltered from the wind and in perfect privacy. Our last night together was memorable.

Day 45

April 10th

We woke up with a dip in the Ganga and an emotional goodbye to this sacred river which played such a meaningful role in our experience as Sadhus. Our dear mother, our haven of peace, our place to sleep, our drinking water, our refuge and source of life in so many ways!

We walked together an hour or two out of Rishikesh until the intersection leading to the next city of Dehradun. We had decided this would be our parting point - my path home would be on foot, alone. Her path home would be hitchhiking.

Our final goodbye was almost wordless. What could words express? Anything put together into a sentence by our gray matter can at best be a vain understatement of the array of emotions we would wish to express. So instead, we stood in awareness, connected eye to eye, soul to soul, imbued with gratitude and

understanding, and even a hint of childish playfulness. And thus we parted.

Well, understanding is a big word, and I have to admit the events were still way beyond me. In my attempt at coping with the intensity of the parting, I spent the next hour in practice of giving thanks, including 108 times of internally repeating, with sustained intention, *Thank you for everything.*

Our walking experience since day one scrolled before my eyes as I digested its richness in my internal goodbye. But I also remembered that Shivaniya's last words were the same as Agori Mataji's last words when we left the burnt bodies behind - *don't look back.*

So I raised my head and mentally closed the chapter.

For the next several hours, I was tinged with the feeling that something had been taken out of my being, leaving behind a troubling void. The road ahead felt long, tough, and not so meaningful anymore. I kept going only out of momentum, but a bit desperate... With the magic gone, I didn't feel like I had it in me to walk this same road all the way back to starting point.

However, after a few hours of moving in an increasingly present state, beauty slowly started seeping back into my life as I adapted to the new conditions. I remembered the original purpose of walking: meditation, awareness in each step.

I quickly became enchanted by encounters, invitations, and offerings... and simply loved being a monk. At some point I was invited for food by young volunteers in a rehab center. They already knew me from interviews and saw me as a celebrity. After I was made to sit and offered a meal, they expressed their gratitude

towards God for making our paths cross. Young but mature, they went on to tell me how they used meditation to help patients come out of alcoholism. They were enchanted by my life choices, but actually I was enchanted by theirs.

My walk went on into the night with excitement and joy, as I crossed brightly lit cities at a lively pace without stopping for anything. Around 9 pm, I recognized a place where I had bathed when Shivaniya and I were walking together one month ago in the opposite direction. It was beside the highway and totally public, a small open field surrounded by farmhouses... but I liked it, and I liked the idea of sleeping anywhere random regardless of who can see me or not. So I set my bed right there under the stars and slept.

Day 46

April 11th

I folded my bedding before sunrise, and had started my Yoga routine when a farmlady came at me in a fit of anger. Her muddled words didn't make much sense but it seemed she just wanted me out of here. I ignored her cloud of darkness, answer with a cheery "Om Nama Shivaya!" and kept doing my Yoga. Confused, she walked away. Life is so simple, I thought to myself.

I then took the road towards Dehradun, a highway surrounded by jungle canopy. For most of the morning I didn't encounter any form of food, my bag was empty and my stamina lowering... I even caught myself observing roadside trash-eating monkeys and wondering "What exactly are they eating? Any of it for me?"

But none of the trash monkeys invited me so I kept going until the end of the jungle and

beginning of Dehradun's suburbs. The rest of the day made for so many encounters with those who saw me in the news, so many offerings of money and food, that I ended up eating to the point where it became difficult to walk. It looked like I was now reaping the fruits from all the energy I had spent with journalists' interviews in Haridwar.

I was still on the same road we had taken with Shivaniya one month ago and it felt like going back through time but with new eyes. I loved it. I saw the shops I already knew, the people who had invited us before, every encounter was warm and friendly. I was asked about her, how is she doing, where is she now, how was our experience together... So despite our physical distance, roadside memories always kept her in my daily life.

But I ended the day sick from over-eating and drinking the endless mix of everything that had been offered to me. The last addition to my stomach was a whole liter of fresh cane juice: it

was such a welcome rush of pleasantness in the dry afternoon heat that I finished it in no more than 30 seconds... after which I proceeded to lie in pain on a roadside concrete slab, holding my stomach with both hands and contemplating the karma of over-consumption.

After half an hour of lethargy I managed to stand up and walk the last three kilometers until the Dehradun Bus station where I had heard I could sleep in a hassle-free public dormitory.

I found the place and my dream came true - 100 rupees a night (barely more than a dollar), friendly staff, one bed amongst 15 that perfectly fit my simple lifestyle, a clean bathroom and drinking water.

Possibly because of my status as a Baba, the owner Kuldeep immediately expressed his faith in me and held me in high regard. But he shared a bit more than I would have expected from a first-time encounter. "I'm the manager of this dormitory but also a dealer, a gangster. I'm

mentally ill." He went on. "I murdered six people already. Maybe you can help me, offer guidance..."

It was an unusual case but I was honored if I could help in any way. "The biggest step towards healing is recognizing the disease" I told him. "Someone who says he's mentally insane, well... he's probably saner than anyone out there thinking they're the best. Because he took a step back. If he has the power to see his disease, it means that *he* and *his disease* are already separate."

"I want to learn meditation. What should I think of?" "Don't worry about thinking or not thinking. Your only job is to observe. Just observe the breath. Everything else will follow, and thoughts will subside on their own."

After our talk he offered me chai and chose to sleep in the bed next to mine. "Don't worry about anything" he told me before going to sleep. "I am here. If anyone bothers you, tell me, I kill them."

Days 47 - 48

April 12th - 13th

I woke up before Kuldeep, who had expressed yesterday the wish to offer me breakfast, and then to "get some weed", by whichever means I don't know... I didn't feel too good about the second part of his plan so I didn't mind that he was still sleeping when I was done packing. I joined my hands, prayed for his well-being, and silently disappeared.

While leaving Dehradun I came across a Decathlon, French-founded outdoor gear megastore whose equipment was making up about 50% of my belongings when I initially left Europe on the walking trip five years go. I owed them a great deal of my survival... and I was pretty surprised to see one right here in India, especially encountered at random along my road.

So after having a laugh on their public trampoline for a few minutes, I walked in

through the automatic glass doors. I felt like an alien from a distant galaxy. The flawlessly aligned shelves, contactless cash registers, fancy security guards and crystal clean floors all set to European standards... and here I was with my black feet cracked-dry and caked in a layer of vaseline mixed with four days' roadside dirt, my Sadhu robes made from unsewn sheets loosely knotted together that had actually never been washed, my hair that had yet to see a mirror, my dark sun-roasted arms, my sleeping mat and blankets hanging left and right like the master of hobos... but somehow they let me in.

After these four days' walk I had a bit of donation money from everyone who saw me on TV. So I gathered whatever I could and vowed to use it wisely: I bought rope to make up for what I had lost, used, or given away during the trip, and a headlamp so I could start walking at night without breaking my leg in a dark ditch or getting hit by traffic. This hobo's getting promoted!

But Dharma was far from this consumer world of faceless buying and selling... or so I thought until the experience became truly faceful with the Nepalese cashier. He really liked me. We really liked each other. He understood why I needed rope and a lamp, he could see I was sleeping outside, and he could see me pull out the bits and pieces of money from my begging bowl. So he took the risk to bypass the store rules and make the purchase under his account with a 30% employee discount. "If security checks the receipt, tell them that you're my friend." I wasn't expecting under-the-counter charity in a place like this!

While leaving Dehradun I was stopped by Paven, a tall dark-skinned perfectly postured Indian man with a deep voice and calm meditative vibe. We connected instantly and he offered me food in a nearby restaurant.

Nowadays, the state seemed to be setting new rules all the time because of rising covid cases, but without a phone my only resource was

asking locals, so I chose to ask Paven my daily question: "Do you happen to know if the border to the state of Himachal Pradesh is still open? No new rules with covid and all?"

His face turned grave. "Actually, yes, there are new rules. Just from today. But on foot, you should be fine..." I was startled. "What new rules? Covid test?" "No, worse..." he answered. "They're talking about a vaccine."

He said it so dramatically that for a while I thought he was joking. But when I realized he wasn't, my mind started going through all kinds of hellish scenarios of being banned from returning home unless I let the powers-that-be inject me with god knows what. I would strictly refuse and end up locked up in a never-ending quarantine like last year's scenario at Covid Episode I.

I was struck with so much worry that I chose to walk straight without sleep until I would reach the border another 40 kilometers away. I would get there tomorrow morning. The later I got

there the more chance I had of running into some crazy new legislation...

So I parted with Paven and thanked him deeply. I took the road, walked and kept walking, through the afternoon and through the night. The night-walk really enchanted me, such peace, such beauty under the stars... as the world settled around me, the world settled inside also...

I reflected on the power of the human mind. Thoughts are so potent they can change lives... Thus came a clear decision: I would meditate through the night, pray for the happiness of all beings, and in the name of that happiness manifest an open border. I would make the border guards my friends instead of foes, and get ready with a box of Indian sweets to give *prassad* - sacred offerings of something small to eat, given by Babas to laypeople.

Funnily enough, as the walk went on I kept getting invited for food and drinks even in the middle of the night. At 3 am, a 24-hour

roadside cafe owner recognized me - he had invited Shivaniya and I one month ago for chai and salty snacks. This time he offered me two chais, an entire meal, cookies, and an invitation to spend the night, or what was left of it. I refused the latter, saying I was on a mission. Besides, if I went to sleep now I'd never wake up.

I reached the border at 8 am, my sleepless mind crashing left and right, my balance like a drunkard, I couldn't even think in a straight line and I was starting to see things. But I stayed very careful about taking breaks - I knew that if I sat for more than 5 minutes my eyes would close and I would fall into deep sleep wherever I was.

So instead I did *Anapana* - meditation on my breath, enjoying a deep and slightly psychedelic state of awareness that kept me going. And I manifested the wish as I was nearing the border: may all beings be happy... in the name of that happiness, may all go smoothly...

And it did. The border guards were talking to each other and didn't even cast a glance as I walked right by with my bag full of Indian sweets that I bought for nothing.

Well, not exactly nothing... I reached the other side of the bridge in such a state of bliss, gratitude towards the world and confidence in the power of my mind that I obviously started distributing the sweets to anyone I would encounter, with a big sleepless smile and two sunken drowsy eyes. Om Nama Shivaya!

To celebrate life, I bathed in Yamuna river from the other side and approached the famous Sikh temple where Shivaniya and I had spent the night one month ago. They hosted me like a king, with a private room and perfect cleanliness. But I also felt a sense of duty so I didn't go straight to sleep - I chose to do a bit of seva at the langar, going from plate to plate of one hundred people and ladling dhal, rice, kheer, curry, vegetables, chai, water, sweets, one by one until my back was aching, and

repeating "Sabzi Vaheguruji!" or "Chaval Vaheguruji!" or "Chai Vaheguruji!" until my mouth was sore. It was an amazing experience, even sleepless, and deeply fulfilling.

I loved the Sikhs, I loved the world, and vowed to make a proper donation by bank transfer when I would get home in Dharamshala. I then retired to my room in the temple lodges and slept for 12 hours.

Day 49

April 14th

After meditation and Yoga in the room I made my way up to the main temple courtyard, feeling really high. The smooth marble floors, glistening in the sun, flooded my vision with yellow haze. Everything seemed to be floating, the world's shapes and sounds were all distant, faint, but also peaceful, and I felt good. It wasn't the first time I noticed after-effects from sleepless nights, and by now I knew it took more than 12 hours to come back to normality.

As the day went on I was invited so frequently for food, drinks, and money that I could forget all about hunger for the rest of the trip, but as I now knew, indigestion could be just as difficult. My philosophy of accepting the gracious acts of people made me consume too much for my own good... So I ended up crossing villages in meditation with my eyes on the ground just to

decrease chances of invitation, because people were usually so sweet I couldn't refuse.

By evening I found a forested hill to sleep on after declining two invitations to people's homes. I had been socially active all day and a wordless night in nature was God's own blessing to replenish my mind.

Day 50

April 13th

My night's sleep was a bit strange and often interrupted by leaves rustling in a rhythmic way which I guessed was the sound of large creatures taking a stroll in the dark. And mosquitoes were so fervent that they lingered around even after sunrise, when I removed the net. They were massive and their bites a painful sting... it got so unbearable I ended up killing quite a few, trying to do my morning routine.

When I hit the road, I was left with an uneasy feeling, having broken the first of the *Yamas*, or Yogic rules of conduct: *Ahimsa*, non-violence. In my *Sadhu* life the other *Yamas* were actually easier to follow, namely *Satya* - pure truthfulness in act and in speech, *Astesya* - not stealing from others or from the planet, *Brahmacharya* - acting out of selfless love rather than personal desire, especially in regard to

relationships, and finally *Aparigraha* - non-greed and non-addiction.

Those who think of Yoga as a series of physical postures, *asanas*, have forgotten that a single apple hides a whole tree. Yoga is a complete path to peace, to happiness, to liberation, a map promising to guide us through life, death, and birth, not to mention one of the foundation stones of our current walking trip with Shivaniya. Diving into the life of a wandering monk was a precious chance to learn to follow these principles and to observe their results on us, on the world...

So back to my first Yama. this uneasiness lasted an hour or so, until I internally forgave the mosquitoes for being the most difficult obstacle in my pilgrimage and at the same time asked for forgiveness myself regarding the ones I had killed. Somehow I felt redeemed.

At some point a man approached on foot with a young boy. "Babaji, this is my son. Can you bless him to be an engineer?" I smiled at the mindset

of modern Homo-Sapiens. "Sorry. All I can do is bless him to be happy. If he's happy, whatever he chooses to do, he'll be successful. If he's unhappy, he would make a bad engineer anyway." "Thank you, ok, thank you Babaji..."

I hope I might have made a small change in this father-son relationship.

I was often amused by the various questions I would get from passers-by when they saw me as a Baba. These ranged from "I have a bad stomach, what to do?" to questions about body aches, mental stress, sexual lust, depression, conjugal conflicts, alcohol, LSD, unemployment, death, and murder. My answer was almost always the same. I guess I just don't know any better... but I believe meditation to be the ultimate remedy. I would tell them to start every day by dedicating a certain time to the practice, however long or however short.

"Start by sitting cross-legged if you can, with a straight spine, and relax the whole body part by part, from head to foot. Your exact physical

posture is not as important as making yourself at ease. Then proceed to simply observe your breath, every single breath, natural breath, as it comes in, as it goes out. Not letting a single breath come in or out unnoticed. The idea is, as we watch the breath, the mind sinks into present-moment awareness and forgets about past or future. As it quiets down, all problems cease to exist because all "problems" were actually created by the mind in the first place."

This technique was taught by the Buddha and named *Anapana*. I've read that on his night of enlightenment, the Buddha himself was simply observing his breath. If it's that powerful and that simple too, it's probably worth a shot.

As I described the practice to laypeople I would usually also take the time to remove my shoes, lay down my assan, and sit cross-legged myself in order to give them a visual memory of the teaching rather than just brain theory. I would also tell them that the practice wasn't limited to mornings but could be done at any point

throughout the day, anytime we felt the need for a break. They were usually really happy, maybe simply because they had received a clear answer.

I'm personally far from a Buddha, at best an ant waddling in the dust at Buddha's feet... but this kind of encounter reminded me of my own commitments, bringing my own mind back to presence and truth no matter what state I was in a minute ago. It was good for both of us.

Quite late in the night I reached Nahan, a clean and pleasant city perched on a hilltop where we had spent two nights already with Shivaniya on her birthday. I asked for lodging in the city's Sikh Temple, and their rooms were closed for renovation but I was given a space in the langar, the large common room which usually hosted groups for meals. My stomach was still broken and I went to sleep with pain, but my mind was greatly relieved.

Day 51

April 16th

I woke up free from stomach pain, feeling great, relaxed, aware, meditative, and connected. The Sikh vibes had totally healed me. Such a loving, devoted, healthy, and peaceful environment... And quite a change from some of the Baba ashrams where going to bed late on chillums was the norm!

As I was sleeping in the common room, I had the chance to see the Sikh priests wake up between 4 and 5 am, clean their hair, make their turbans, start preparing food for the community kitchen, and start *bajan* - devotional singing from their highly talented musicians. I loved everyone here.

With such a start, my day was inherently pleasant. As I made my way up the mountain after leaving Nahan, I met some of the cafe owners who had invited Shivaniya and I a month back. They obviously invited me again,

this time with even more goodies. But everyone else also seemed to know me as well and I was given so much money that by now, I knew I could buy just about anything I wanted on my road. But ironically, even when I tried to buy something, it was almost always given to me for free.

As night fell I kept walking an hour or two in the lightly falling rain, after which someone recognized me in the dark and told me to come... They happened to be the owners of the same Baba Ashram where Shivaniya and I had spent one night a month ago. I met all the same faces, they were delighted to see me, they knew about the videos and asked every detail about our journey together, how I had spent my time there, how she had spent her time there, how is she doing now... Funny thing, that of all people I didn't have the slightest clue what she was up to or even where she was... without a phone, you have to trust the world and be open to anything.

Day 52

April 17th

Having gone to bed late yesterday from the music and talking, I woke up a bit dull. I chose to hit the road before any form of socializing and I had a pleasant mountain day, until a late-afternoon hailstorm had me running for shelter. The stormy weather lasted for hours but I still tried to get a bit of walking done until I was mostly soaked. No chance of sleeping outside tonight... but local villagers had mercy on me and invited me into a place called *Forest Resthouse* on top of a hill. I reached the door dripping and cold, and they saved me in every way. It's was a small government-owned guesthouse in absolute peace held by two loving and humble souls Sanjay and Cheranji. They prepared simple food, gave me all the silence I needed, only asking a few questions about my life and its motives, and just let me do my own thing. This was exactly what I needed after last night's social activity and meager rest.

Day 53

April 18th

My hosts at Forest Resthouse obviously didn't expect any kind of contribution, but I really felt like giving back, especially with the stack of bills in my bag growing every day from donations... So I did my best at folding a 200 rupee note into an origami heart the way Shivaniya had taught me, making the giving experience more personal and hopefully upping its chances of being accepted. But as I pulled it out, Sanjay jumped back at the mere sight of it. "No, no way! You keep that for the road."

He won, I backed out immediately. I knew by experience that insisting too much, even selflessly, can have an effect much worse than accepting things with a smile.

After making my way to the next village, I went for breakfast at a local *Dhaba* - an eatery, with the firm intention of *no matter what, I'm gonna*

pay for this meal. I had so much donation money it was a shame.

So I had my *paratha* frybread in silence, trying my best not to attract attention. For now, things looked good. Nobody knew who I was. But near the end of the meal, a customer from the neighboring table recognized me. "Hey, it's that Swiss guy who walked to India!" he exclaimed with joy. Busted!

The mood in the Dhaba changed instantly. Ok, it looks like everyone knows, but I think I can still get away with paying for the meal. I reached in my bag and started counting 10 rupee bills, hoping to free up some space instead of paying with one large note. I guess counting my pennies must have made me look even poorer, and as I tried to hand it to the owner, there was no way he would accept. "Keep your money, it's on us!" he said emphatically. I insisted. He refused. Finally I accepted his refusal and left doing walking Metta instead, sending blessings to him, the Dhaba folks, and the world.

A bit later in the day, I was stopped in yet another village Dhaba whose owners remembered me since last time we were invited with Shivaniya. This time I was really showered with gifts. The villagers put so much money in my almsbowl it was embarrassing, but I knew it was best to accept it with a smile and a *pranam* - a Baba's blessings.

At every donation though, I noticed the thought running in my head, "what am I gonna do with this? Every rupee has spiritual significance and I can't just spend it randomly on anything I need in the future layperson's life... as for my current daily needs, they only cost a fraction of what I receive, especially when nearly everything is being given to me..."

Today's external conditions were heavenly but I was starting to suffer from quite a few physical symptoms. My feet were getting pretty badly blistered and my left foot's toes were so worn that much of the skin had decided to jump ship, leaving behind open wounds. The walk became

increasingly painful as bits of earth got stuck in the wounds, and I was seeing hints of infection. Walking on injured feet affected my mood quite a bit, but I chose to turn it into an *Adhitthana* meditation. In other words, keep cool and observe the pain.

Quite a bit after dark I reached the mountainside city of Solan: a new scene on my road and the first time my path parted with the one we had taken with Shivaniya. I placed my bets on the *Gurudwara* - the Sikh Temple, as my experiences with them had been so positive... but this time I got an unexpected reaction.

"New covid rules starting today" they said. "You can't stay here without a covid certificate." An argument went on for 20 minutes. "Politics, TV, police, covid rules, that's one thing" I asserted, "but in the end, you and I are people. We all need to eat, we all need to drink, we all need to sleep. A Gurudwara's doors are open to all. It's in your books."

It wasn't easy to convince them but at some point they found no better option than to let me in. I had a proper wash and a warm night's sleep, but from now on I wouldn't be relying on Gurudwara's anymore. Maybe it was a sign I should be more open to spontaneous invitations rather than trying to plan my nights: putting full trust in whatever the world would give me.

Day 54

April 19th

I made a donation as I left the Sikh Temple, but I felt a bit like a stranger from beginning to end. And as I took the road and felt the pain of setting weight on my swollen left foot, I realized, with a kind of anguished laugh, what exact condition I had apart from the blisters. It was something I had experienced lightly two years ago in Kyrgyzstan, and my mom had had it severely three years back when we were walking together in Armenia. It was called Plantar Fasciitis.

We could call it the overwalker's disease: God's way of telling you "You walk too much, take a break!" The fascia in the foot's plant swells due to excessively repeated pressure, leading to pain that can get so bad you can't walk from the bed to the bathroom anymore, as was my mom's case after our walk in Armenia. My own case in

Kyrgyzstan didn't get that bad but still had me pretty handicapped for a few weeks.

My mix of foot conditions had me a bit despaired until I realize the beauty of this new teaching: I remembered a line from Buddha's biography *Old Path White Clouds* written by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. After abandoning the princely life, Buddha used to always travel on foot and refused rides on horsecarts.

"The Buddha walked just to enjoy the walking, unconcerned about arriving anywhere at all. So it was with all the *Bhikkhus*, the followers. No one seemed anxious or impatient to reach their destination. Each man's steps were slow, balanced, and peaceful. It was as if they were taking a pleasant stroll together. No one ever appeared tired, and yet they covered a good distance each day."

This is what I had always been dreaming of! But it took even more patience than my usual pace, which for now averaged at around 6 km/h. I

didn't have much choice: either I would cut that speed in two or I'd end up crawling on my knees like the Rugrats all the way to Dharamshala.

So I took it slowly all day, with insight and meditation. When pain came, I breathed through the pain... altogether it worked, but I only covered 20 kilometers from dawn to dusk instead of 40. If this kept on going, I would need to seriously reconsider my arrival date. But it also gave me a peek into a new way of moving, a new way of being, that felt far more aware, connected, and balanced than my previous mindset of doing as much as my body would let me. It feels like the next step in my spiritual practice, the next step in my life.

So I walked until dark and found a level surface near the roadside, kept semi-private by a pile of gravel where I happily set my bed. I admired the view on the valley and distant plains of what I covered these last days. And this night's conditions were too good to be true - no rain, no wind, no bugs or mosquitoes, neither heat

nor cold, no animals or humans getting in the way... I couldn't hope for better and had a sacred sleep.

Day 55

April 20th

I woke up in joy under the clear 5 am sky at the threshold between stars and sunlight. I started by bandaging my left foot to prevent infections on my blistered toes, and took the road. As for the swelling, it was doing a bit better but still painful. The walk was successful enough until afternoon, where I was slapped in the face by the most pitiless weather so far - hours of pouring rain and freezing wind. I was nearing Shimla, Himachal Pradesh's capital city perched above 2200 meters, and I could really feel it. I suffered so much from the elements I almost wished the trip was over... On top of that I had no option to stop and catch my breath: the only thing keeping me warm was my constant efforts uphill, and any kind of break would have me freezing in my soaked clothing.

But as usual, upon investigation I found a glimpse of truth in a seemingly miserable

situation. Instead of complaining about the cold, I tried bringing my focus back to my left foot, which had been full of suffering these past days. Fasciitis, open blisters... and I noticed with astonishment that no more. Zero pain. My neurons were just too busy complaining about the freezing rain. One thing at a time for those simple cells...

My brain is like our latter-day governments. A disease like covid comes, and they all start fighting covid. Covid leaves, and without a day's break they turn to fight each other. Covid comes back, and once again they leave each other alone to start fighting covid. As long as there's a problem, everything's ok.

So what do I learn about the nature of pain? Even our apparent physical problems are created by our own minds. As if it just needed something to chew on, some kind of suffering to keep it busy. It doesn't matter what, give it something!

So when greater suffering came in the form of extreme weather conditions, my mind dropped all physical pain linked to my foot. Doesn't that logically imply that physical pain can be dropped altogether, the freezing weather as well?

Finally, I reached the beautiful European-style city of Shimla in the late afternoon, set straight on a panoramic mountain ridge, and the sky started to brighten a bit along with my mind. Shimla is known for having a scenic white Church at its central square, built by the British in 1857, which I intended to include in my pilgrimage: I'd been staying in houses of God all along my trip in India as well as before. Sikh Temples, Hindu Temples, Mosques... but I never had the chance to try a church and find out what kind of mindset they have regarding hospitality.

So as the evening settled I aimed straight for Shimla's famed Ridge Church. The main door was closed, but after a bit of wandering around

and talking to locals I was led through the back door and managed to have a discussion with the head priest's son. He was very touched that I slept in houses of God and had chosen this church as part of my mission. But he still refused, blaming it on new covid rules. We talked for a bit about Christ and *interfaith* - the common ground between different religions and the need to embrace them all. Then I thanked him and I walk out. It would have been really cool to sleep in a church as a Hindu Baba, but I did my best, and that had been my mission to begin with. I considered it accomplished.

So here I was back in the streets of Shimla and started to walk calmly, aimlessly, enjoying the air. I couldn't help but notice the widespread panic in people's attitudes and I was glad I didn't have a phone to watch state news about covid. I would probably die of anxiety before any other ailment.

Hindu places of worship seemed to be the only ones left to see people as human beings instead

of covid threats, so I started to ask around for a temple. It was past 8 pm and I was walking in the darkness of a poorly lit backstreet when I was greeted by a random "I've seen you on TV!" from a middle-aged man, his sister, and his wife. They knew all about my trip and greatly appreciated my life choices. I explained my lodging situation. First off, they gave me 3500 rupees straight, enough to pay for the fanciest hotel in town. Then I was brought to a room in the building in which they live, offered dinner and a space for the night.

Day 56

April 21st

I couldn't measure my gratitude for being hosted overnight and saved from the outside cold, but even then I woke up a bit frozen. Shimla was higher up and quite a bit colder than anything I had in mind when packing for my Sadhu life two months ago. Still, I was far from dead and not falling ill either: I blessed the world and everything it gave me. Which also happened to include breakfast delivered to my doorstep and packed food for the road by my generous hosts.

Roaming through Mall Road, the central and most scenic street in Shimla, was an interesting experience. "5 years... Kumbha Mela... 18 countries... Switzerland... on foot... 15'000 kilometers..." made up much of the lingo in my surrounding environment, and I made it a game to avoid attention in every way possible. Sometimes, despite my fleeting gaze someone

would still spark a conversation with me, followed by a selfie, then five more selfies, ten more people, and I would flee before the crowd got any bigger.

But at some point I was approached by a camera crew working for Indian TV. An interview was more meaningful than one hundred selfies and represented a chance to bring a positive change to many people, so I accepted.

The first question came before turning on the camera. "Before we start, can we ask you to wear a mask? It's the law in Shimla."

"No."

A pleasant and very interesting silence followed. "...ok."

I thought about *Satya* and somehow really enjoyed that instant of simple honesty. The cameras were on and the interview flowed breezefully, until I noticed with terrifying dread the growing crowd around me: at least thirty people holding their smartphones menacingly,

ready to assault me with selfies and questions as soon as the journalists would let me go. But God's boundless mercy saved me. The last (I imagine...) question was "Now, can we have one or two shots of you while you walk?" "With joy!" I answered.

They opened the crowd to let me walk, and started filming. I walked past the cameras casually, past the crowd, and just kept walking without a glimpse back. I looked calm but my heart was thumping as I walked on and on... Ten minutes later, I finally turned around to check. Not a soul nor a selfie in sight. Eureka! I laughed hysterically and started greeting dogs.

Shimla is Shimla, the poshest city in Himachal Pradesh, known for its expensive romance getaways and famous movie scenes. So I chose the fanciest cafe I could find, a polished hardwood Switzerland-style bakery selling fancy cakes with fancy names. Let's break some boundaries and try being a Sadhu in a new environment.

The owner seemed a bit surprised to see me, but his demeanor was sweet and gentle. I sat down and had a hot brownie with some sort of Latte whose name I forgot, over which we had a very pleasant conversation about meditation, compassion, and liberation. By the end of it we were real friends, and even though the cakes were priced by European standards, his answer to "so... how much do I owe you?" was a warm smile. "Whatever you want."

After the cake experience came another novelty in my Sadhu adventure - buying electronics. It sounds superficial, but I see it as a noble mission, born from Metta, selfless love. Please bear with me.

I needed a memory card for my camera as the previous ones I brought were full. This small sports cam was the only piece of electronics I brought along, and there was nothing in it for me: filming the experience was my family Seva, my selfless service. Documenting the trip, both in film and through this journal, was one of the

only things I gave back to my folks back home. Gone for so many years and physically absent from my birthland, the least I could do was share whatever the circumstances would allow me to share. I owed so much to my family, forever indebted for being given the kind of freedom and support necessary to live such a lifestyle in such a faraway land...

This kind of significant purchase meant conjuring the donations of countless benefactors along the way. As I counted the bills and brought them to my forehead, I saw the cycle of energy and goodwill, all these contributions to me, transforming into my own contributions to the West, whose own contributions allowed me to make such a trip in the first place.

So nothing escapes the scope of Karma. Even electronics.

As much as I enjoyed my time in Shimla, it felt good to leave the paranoia hub of covid obsession. As soon as I got back to the villages,

greetings change from "Where's your mask?" to "Om Nama Shivaya!"

My left foot's blister condition wasn't really improving, and the now constant battering rain was soaking through the bandage, making the infections worse. Did I mention it was infected? Anyway, it was.

I couldn't take it anymore so I stopped after hardly 10 kilometers at a Bimakali Temple. The *Pujari* - temple priest, was gentle and adorable. We talked over chai and he agreed to host me for the night. After a while, another guest came, and upon seeing me exclaimed to the *Pujari* "Hey, it's this guy who walked from Switzerland in five years!!"

"I know" calmly answers the *Pujari*. "I saw him in the news."

What? I'd been here for nearly an hour and I still didn't know he knew! He hadn't mentioned it nor taken it into account in his decision to let me stay. This man just gained my full respect: I

was honored he was seeing me for who I was face to face instead of my status on social media.

Day 57

April 22nd

The Pujari was a *Grhastha* - he had a wife and children, and they were all angels to me. I was seen off with affection and had a heavenly-lit sunny morning, but my foot infection wasn't improving, and the afternoon's pouring rain prevented me from walking unless I wanted it to worsen.

When things were at their darkest, the table turned as I was invited in a cafe by lovable folks who had previously seen me on the road and wanted to help. I forgot about distance, chose to focus on healing instead, and spent the rest of the afternoon sheltered from the rain. Finally they even invited me for the night in a brand new home built to European standards where they were all staying together.

I gladly accepted and we spent the evening playing *bajan* - devotional songs, with their guitar and harmonium, exchanging stories and

having such a good time we hardly noticed the thunderstorms going on outside. I owe them everything.

Day 58

April 23rd

I woke up observing the never-ending storm outside from this surreal cocoon of dryness and warmth we call a house. I examined my left foot's infection and it wasn't any better... My hosts insisted I should stay one more day, as the weather wasn't meant to improve anytime soon. I gave in, and chose to make it a day of meditation and healing. As usual, I was treated like a king, such hospitality that I was a bit at loss as to what I could possibly give in return... until I realized my most valuable contribution was simply presence, being with them in peace and joy. They didn't expect nor accept anything else, and happiness was on both sides.

Day 59

April 24th

The stormy weather was finished and my foot looked good, so I woke up early to start the walk on a clean new page. But during morning Taichi, I put full body weight on my left foot to test it out and my toe burst open under the pressure, releasing a stream of mixed pus and blood that flowed down onto the floor. I watched the ugly scene with a mix of despair and uneasy laughter. If I don't laugh about it no one else will!

From the amount of pus that came out the infection was obviously quite deep. I didn't wanna lose my toe but now was not the time to spend two weeks in a hospital, so I chose not to tell anyone, wrap the mess up in bandage, and postpone my train of thoughts until my arrival home in Dharamshala. For now I could still walk on it. Let's see what I deserve.

I'm not sure what happened these few last days, maybe it was the Shimla interview going viral... but people were stopping me like never before. I could hardly walk for two minutes before a car stopped with a family, followed by five minutes of selfies, socializing, and receiving money. Sometimes it got so bad that several other cars stopped, having noticed the first one, and waited in line for selfying me, making a seemingly never-ending loop during which I couldn't even take one step. As much as I appreciated their appreciation - some of them having driven from afar just to come and meet me, give me fruits or money - this kind of fame made my walk almost impossible. I ended up exhausted, nearly being rude to the very people who were delighted to see me, and here I was having completed no distance at all.

At some point, I literally ran away from a group of a dozen people coming from afar, shouting frantically "Stop Babaji! Babaji, selfie!!!" My shameless technique worked and in the end they

gave up, but I don't know if I should see the whole scene as either super rude or pretty comical. It did make me laugh like a child but also wonder where my karma was headed...

At least that funny running incident was a clear indicator that something needed to be changed, and marked the beginning of a significant new chapter in my story.

Maun

Western transliterations usually write it as *muni*, as I have too, earlier in this book. But after Kumbha Mela I had a clearer idea of yogic terminology, and in Hindi the term is मौन, pronounced *Maun*. So for the sake of honoring its roots, that's the term I'll be using. For clarification, the "au" in *Maun* is pronounced like the English "o" sound in "more" or "door".

Maun means silence, *Mauni* meaning "the silent one". *Mauni* Baba's have existed for as long as the Baba culture itself, and in fact silence was part of life much before animal cries and human speech. Non-verbal communication can be seen as the most ancient way to interact, a bit like coming back to one's roots. *Mauni*'s are allowed to communicate, but this wordlessness, this soundlessness, brings their interaction to a

much subtler level. Superficial mind-stuff is cut at its root. No more man-made concepts like *what's your name* and *where are you from*.

Many saints in the past have understood the futility of speech and decided to abandon it altogether. Deprived from words, the mind settles into stillness and enjoys a newly found energy that had previously been spent on talking and thinking. No more need to think of what you said. No more need to plan whatever you will say. The past and future lose much of their grasp, and in turn presence grows.

But all that is not what convinced me. In my case, the reason was very down to earth: Maun was the only way for me to get home. There was no hope of doing any kind of distance unless I transcended conversation and just kept walking.

So in mid-morning I officially took the Maun vow and entirely stop talking. Whatever couldn't be expressed in body language, facial expressions, or subtle feeling wouldn't be expressed at all. The first half-hour was a bit

funny getting used to, but it quickly became very smooth and natural.

I like the mindset shift it triggered in me as well as others. This wasn't apathy. Something could definitely be expressed. In fact, everything we really need can be expressed - but it cuts away all the small talk and reduces conversations to one quarter of their original length. With this new mindset I noticed myself much more loving, not socially exhausted anymore, and getting my distance done. Everything I lacked in words I made up in attention and started to actually look at people instead of just talking to get it over with. And India's awesome - people know what a Mauni is. Neither deaf nor mute but choosing silence as a spiritual observance.

Sometimes I'd still get a "Hey, I saw your interview and you were talking! And now you're pretending not to. Why?" To answer, I'd join my hands in Namaste and look up at the sky, referring to God. "Yeah, but why?" they would

repeat, as if I was going to start speaking. But I'm done answering, so I would just stand there with eye contact. "ok..." they would finally answer. I love how it simplifies things.

In the late afternoon I was offered a plate of nuts and cookies with tea. I was enjoying it more than ever: I could just eat! No need to talk between mouthfuls, even when I was surrounded by people. They did ask questions, but instead of directing them to me, they directed them to each other. "How long has he been walking?" someone would ask. "Uh, I think five years" someone else would answer. "Yeah, that's right, five years, I saw it on TV!" yet another would confirm. Not talking was like a vacation for me!

Near the end of my tea break I was visited by a police officer. "The head officer is waiting for you. When you're done with your tea, please stop by the next police station, 500 meters further." I nodded and he left. Locals around me

tried to comfort me. "Don't worry, it's just about entry formalities into the new district..."

Of course I worried. It didn't sound like banal formalities to me. I was pretty sure they know me, like everyone else... and they knew I was breaking quite a few rules about covid. The mask was compulsory: I didn't even own one... any form of traveling was highly discouraged, inter-state borders were locking up, night curfews were being introduced, week-end lockdowns, covid certificates for foreigners... and new rules were being added every day so I didn't even know what I was breaking.

At best, I thought, I would be spending one night at the police station and be free to go in the morning. At worst, they'd either quarantine me for coming from another state or force me on a vehicle, or both. And being Mauni drastically reduced my arguing skills in case I disagreed with the outcome. Oh well, let's believe in God and do loads of Metta. May all beings be happy. May all beings be happy.

So I reached the police station ten minutes later and they brought me to the head office. Before even entering the room, I was greeted by a wave of bows, hats off, and honorific salutes. The head officer had me sit. "What will you have? Food? Tea? Fruits?"

My face shined at the last word, so fruits it was. He was beaming, and started a discourse. "Ladies and gentlemen, this man's mere presence in our headquarters is a blessing to all of those here, what an auspicious event to host someone of such spiritual grandeur!"

It was funny how my eyes hardly ever met his - he was avoiding mine out of humbleness, I was avoiding his out of embarrassment for being put on such a high pedestal. He went on publicly complimenting me for a bit, then had everyone stand and offered me roses on camera. I was even asked to do *ashirbat* to him and his officers - a gesture where a Baba lays his hand on a layperson's bowed head to give him a blessing. I was given a large goodie bag of

melons, mangos, bananas, sanitizer, and a facemask. The two latter made me laugh, but I'm sure they had some auspicious meaning in Neo-Covidism.

My Maun vow wasn't affecting anyone negatively at all, in fact it added even more specialness, holiness to the situation. I was told they'd take care of my lodging for the night, giving me the choice between a temple and a hotel. My decision was quick to make: I didn't need the authorities' help to sleep in a temple, I did it all the time for free. But getting a hotel paid for by the chief of police, that sounded pretty cool!

So I was guided to a place named "Forest Resthouse" (déjà vu?) where I was treated not so much like a King but more like a saint, almost a deity... the staff touched my feet as they came and ask me what food I would have... I was given the fanciest room in the whole premises, flawless cleanliness and room service ready to bring me anything I wanted whenever I

wanted. After the meal I had a long meditation session, bathing in appreciation for the people around me and enjoying my new speechless mind, so calm, so silent after one day's vow of silence... and I slept like a spoilt baby.

Day 60

April 25th

My night was truly therapeutic and my foot actually looked better. Yesterday had been a one-day trial of taking the Maun vow, and in the morning I was allowed to speak again to see where it would take me, to compare both worlds.

But after one interview and a small handful of conversations, I chose to go Maun again. This time with a twist: I took out a permanent marker and wrote मौन on my forearm. In the rare event that people would look really confused, thinking what's wrong with me, I would show it to them and their faces would instantly change. In the end they always understood me, and this extra layer of Indian culture often brought about even more respect. Without language, I often felt like a child in the world of grown-ups, and I have to say it's really fun.

My favorite part is observing people's own reactions when facing a Mauni. Some bring their voice to a whisper, as if I disliked sound. Some, on the other hand, start speaking louder as if I was hard of hearing. Some just speak to me normally and then translate my gesticulation into their own words to confirm what I want to say. The latter can make funny results. "Where are you going?" one man once asked. I waved my hand in the direction of Dharamshala, hoping he would understand. But he answered "I get it, wherever your feet will bring you!" I nodded gleefully. I couldn't have answered better!

Some, still, turn completely silent themselves as soon as they realize I'm a Mauni. They might start communicating with signs as well, or stop communication altogether and just sit in peace. Sometimes a whole group who invited me for chai or food would cease conversation to each other and come to a silence. This moment of wordless tranquility would last until my

departure, giving everyone a taste of Maun for themselves.

But all in all, no matter how people react to my silence it invariably questions their own habit patterns, how and why do they communicate.

A memorable event today was my first Maun interview. Obviously, he did most of the talking. It started with a generic "What's your name?"

Silence. I pointed to my arm. "Oh!" he answered, "Maun! Your name is Maun!" I frowned, shaking my head, and encouraged him to try again.

Silence. "Oh, you're a Mauni! You don't speak!" he finally exclaimed. I then confirmed enthusiastically. The camera was still on me but the pressure was all on his side.

"Ok, so... I think you're from New Zealand, right?" I denied. "Uh... no, you're from Switzerland!" I nodded. I knew he'd seen the previous interviews, so my job was just to refresh his memory.

"How long have you been walking?" he went on with audacity. I opened my hand, showing five fingers. "Five years, yes? How many countries have you crossed in that time?" I used both hands to show 10, plus 8. "Ok, 18, right? Where are you headed?" I pointed ahead, and used my hand to show two fingers, followed by a zero, and another zero. He remarkably understood. "Ok, 200 uh... kilometers. Manali?" I shook my head. "Dharamshala?" I beamed with glee.

"Great... where will you stay tonight?" I showed him my rolled up sleeping mat, after which I pointed to the left and the right of the road. "Ok, anywhere at all, outside. You're coming from Haridwar, right?" I nodded. "Thank you... and, last question, why are you walking?" I raised my hands to the sky, then joined them together in Namaste, closed my eyes, and enjoyed an instant of meditation. "Ok, thank you so much for your time!"

He did well, I thought to myself, despite such an unusual subject!

Today was also the first time I accidentally broke my vow in public. It happened after a wonderful roadside meal that I had asked for. Obviously I tried to pay, and withdrew a bill from my almsbowl. "Babaji, keep your money, it's our pleasure to invite you!"

But I really wanted to pay, and my gut reaction took over, snapping back in Hindi "Nahi, kyung ki log..." oops. Two seconds it took and four words, before I noticed... what felt like a computer bug in my mind.

But my listeners were such respectful people that their faces were only a bit sorry that I had broken the vow, obviously aware it was an accident. As for me, I instantly abandoned the argument of trying to pay, put my money away, and saw once again the power of Maun - it cuts verbal conflict at its root. Without weapons, how can there be war?

All in all I had a very peaceful lockdown Sunday with not that much exchanging and plenty of meditation. I ended the day by setting camp on

a hill that overlooked both the road I came from and the way I was heading, a dazzling view of the entire valley under a moonlit sky.

Day 61

April 26th

My day started with a Yoga session on my personal mountaintop paradise, and proceeded at a healthy walking pace, plunged into meditation, enjoying the inner stillness of my vow of silence. I was starting to notice its long term effects, feeling quite high, spacious, and finely tuned to the world around me. It felt like visiting another dimension, another layer of reality, compared to my previous life of mind-activity.

Despite my silence, I received countless invites throughout the day, most of which I refused in order to do the distance. Not to mention I was pretty happy in my own world.

I noticed another interesting pattern: paying for things had become such a rare event that I had come to greatly appreciate it. Of course it was a joy to be given something out of pure goodwill, but for that same reason it was a joy to be able

to give back. Two months back, Shivaniya had also made a point: giving back to break the stereotype of Sadhu-beggars only in it for the money.

So today I managed to pay. Once. It was a kind of fancy roadside restaurant, fancy enough to have ice-cream, which I bought and greatly enjoyed. After sitting for a bit on my assan, pleasantly sheltered from the afternoon sun, I stood up, brought a bill to my forehead and handed it to him. He accepted and tried to give me back my change, which I refused - this was about giving, not counting coins. So instead, he gave me a bottle of water, which I accepted. A simple, light-hearted, and friendly exchange which we both really enjoyed!

Despite endless invites to sleep in people's homes, I once again set camp on a hilltop. This vow really made me love sleeping outdoors, as if my new language was the one spoken by nature.

Day 62

April 27th

Another day in silence. I'm enjoying this Maun vow so much it's becoming addictive.

After folding camp and making my way down the valley, I crossed the bridge into Mandi, the last district until home. The border guards stopped me and made an interesting scene.

"Excuse me sir, where are you from?" Silence. I showed them the मौन on my arm as if it was my passport. "Ahh, ok..." the officer answered with a slightly troubled face. "Uhh, so, but, where are you coming from just now?" I pointed behind me, to the other side of the bridge. We were obviously getting nowhere but he went on with border formalities. "So, uh, going to?" I pointed in front of me.

Silence. For a whole minute. They really didn't know what to do but the exchange didn't look like it was over so I started doing my Yoga on the roadside. When I was finished, they had

neither moved in position nor in thought process, so I casually waved *Namaste* and left. No one stopped me.

I walked on until 2 pm, where the sun was at its hottest and I stopped at a roadside restaurant. After asking for food through body language, I laid my assan on the floor and sat cross-legged, as usual disregarding the tables and chairs. I didn't feel too much appreciation from the restaurant staff and I could read their minds... Who's this strange beggar from God knows where who won't speak a word and probably won't pay for his food either...

I was still served though, and ate my meal with appreciation, until two cops came in and instantly recognized me. They praised me, asked for a selfie, sat down near me for their own meal, and told the staff every detail about my journey with great respect.

I noticed with a laugh how people's attitude towards me changed, and when I tried to pay for the meal, my attempt was refused. I tried

again, firmly holding out the 200 rupee note. Finally he took it, and I was glad he accepted. Only to put it straight back into my almsbowl! I broke the silence with a burst of laughter and accept his counter-offering. I've already heard Mauni's laugh before and I think it's ok: I'd put it in the same slot as coughing or sneezing or burping or farting.

Being a Mauni has more benefits than I could have imagined, and I was once again surprised by its effects when a twentyish young boy with a big smile decided to walk with me.

Side note: I've always faced a bit of discomfort when people randomly show up and walk along with no apparent destination. *How long will they stick to me? I can't meditate or think straight if I'm constantly being talked to, I lose my breath in endless conversation, and no offense but I just wanna walk... and besides, no one except for me would choose to go that long on foot: are they up to something?* Would be the kinds of thoughts

that go through my mind as I'm usually longing for the relief of being left alone.

But not this time. In his company I enjoyed the same state as when I was walking alone: peace. No breath to waste in conversation, no mind to spend socializing... all my energies remained focused on my one task. When he finally took leave after a few kilometers together, I knew neither his name nor the slightest information, but I was actually sad to see him off. I hugged him goodbye.

I reached the town of Sundernagar, literally *beautiful village*, quite late at night and asked for lodging in its biggest Hindu temple. The temple's "registration office" - yes, a novelty for me also - wasn't too delighted about my Maun vow but still welcomed me warmly.

Day 63

April 28th

Despite my silence, I was asked for three interviews today. The first one was a failure, which made my life easy: one minute into the interview, the young Youtuber gave up and said goodbye.

Then came a team of journalists. This time the interview lasted ten minutes, made possible by a group of spectators around me who had seen me in the news. Every question was answered by a mix of my sign language and the various statements from those around.

The final interview was conducted by a highly-ranked police officer with deep admiration for my journey. "I came with my family specifically to meet you!" He exclaimed with joy. "You're a great inspiration to the Indian youths and to us older ones too! An ambassador of our culture to our own country!"

He interviewed me for a few minutes by guessing my gesticulated answers, interwoven by his words of praise. On camera, he offered me a *Pahari Cap* - a traditional Himachali hat, telling me he purchased it just now for the event. Of course it didn't fit on my head with all my dreadlocks, but that didn't get in the way of the symbolic nature of the act and I accepted his offering with praise.

I was in heaven with my vow, but it had been on my mind to be speaking again by the time I would reach my home in Dharamshala, as a duty towards my family, friends, and neighbors. But breaking a vow of silence is like breaking a fast: if you don't do it properly, mindfully and meaningfully, you throw away half of your work. So I chose to come back to the speaking world in a phased approach: until I got home, I was going to stay silent as long as the sun was up, saving my energy for walking meditation. At night however, I could extend my hosts the

favor of speaking, always in a minimal and moderate way.

But how exactly would I define *night* or *evening*? I could choose *sunset*, which would mean 7:15 pm, so... would I just randomly start talking again, surrounded by a crowd of selfies? That didn't sound right or meditative at all...

So I decided "I will lift my vow the moment I step into the home of the one who will host me for the night." If my host happens to be nature, great, no need to speak at all.

As I reached Mandi, I used pen and paper to ask my way to Bootnath Temple, a famous 500-year old stone masterpiece I had been told about on the road, and ended up in front of their main gate. I was stoked to ask for lodging in such a place, but it turned out I wasn't even really let into the courtyard. "The temple is closed. We used to host people but we don't anymore. Covid rules. No permission."

When you don't have words you have to rely on actions, so I calmly walked my way in, regardless of their refusal, and sat on a bench in meditation. Around me, the temple family was far from convinced. They asked me questions, with obviously no answers. A bit later a policeman showed up and said I couldn't stay without a covid certificate...

So I made the choice myself: *I'm not moving, this is where I'm spending the night.* Since these were now my hosts, as per the rules I set on myself I now had the freedom to lift the vow of silence.

Eyes closed, sitting in lotus while everyone else was busy talking, I start chanting Om's, followed by mantras for universal happiness. "Bhavatu sabba mangalam, Rakhantu sabba devata. Sabba Buddha nubhavena, Saddha soti bhavantu te."

May all beings be happy, under the protection of the deities. By summoning the power of all the Buddhas, may they forever be well.

Singing has never felt so good. I had a new voice, and as it deeply resonated within my body, I felt the whole world vibrating with me. The power of these age-old Buddhist words seemed to pervade the universe, and as I opened my eyes, everything is different.

Astonished by the fact I was using my voice, the people around me gave another go at asking me questions. This time I answered. With calm, with awareness, with cause, with truth.

Everyone started liking me, and before I knew it Devanand Saraswati, the temple's Head Baba, appeared as if summoned by the Gods.

Young and powerful, calm and vibrant, showing a deep and meaningful smile... I burst in joy at the mere sight of him, touching his knees and greeting him with names of Shiva.

Without one second's hesitation he made his own rules: I was led to a large room facing the temple courtyard and shown a space where I

could sleep. "Lay your assan here, use our blankets, and spend the night. No problem."

By the Guru's infinite grace the police had to comply, and covid rules and regulations were all forgotten. Well here's one authority above the police... what a compelling hierarchical system! I gratefully laid my assan, thanked the Gods and sat in meditation. The temple family were now all my friends and they made food and chai, which the police officer personally brought to me with utmost respect.

Day 64

April 29th

I spontaneously woke up before sunrise, feeling aware and vibrant with life. Such inner peace is hard to describe. I strolled my way through the 6 am deserted streets of Mandi and sat on a secluded stone ledge overlooking the river. In my bag, I had bananas and cookies from yesterday's offerings so I chose to have my breakfast here, in silence, in presence, question-free, selfie-free.

But even before sunrise, my greatest subconscious fear came true as I heard a voice behind me. "Babaji, selfie?"

Such a simple question, no harm intended in any way... yet like a pebble inadvertently dropped from a hill, it created an avalanche of irritation. I thanked the Gods for making me Maun so at least my feelings wouldn't express themselves. Still, my body language was undeniably rude and yet he kept smiling the

whole time. After the selfie, for which I wasn't smiling, he even came back with a large bag of fruits, which I had to refuse as I couldn't afford to put any more pressure on my injured left foot. Of course I appreciated his generosity, so I blessed the fruits and handed them back to him in thanks, keeping just one symbolic banana.

But the whole incident left me wondering about my purpose, the purpose of this trip, the purpose of my life. If I'm not being kind to people, where's the slightest point? At best I'm pretending to be a saint. At worst I'm actually the Grinch who stole Christmas.

So I firmly decided to focus on selfless love for the 122 kilometers left until my home. I even added a little heart beside the "maun" written on my arm to make sure there was no turning back: I had to live up to that girly heart every time I showed my arm. As a result, my interaction with people instantly changed and my whole day unfolded amazingly.

When the sun started fading I decided to walk into the night to get more distance done, and as I had no home, this time I chose to break the silence after dark. Fair enough, in total darkness, non-verbal communication becomes a very different story. I can't show people the मौन on my arm in case they're wondering what's wrong with me. I can't use body language, they can't see my face, basically there's no way to get the slightest thing across. On top of that, finding a place to sleep after 9 pm can be tricky even with the use of language...

All these points together gave me good reason to lift the vow as it got pitch black. And it turned out that my first verbal conversation, like yesterday's, happened to also be the one which led to a place to stay. Without notice I was approached by a young man Golu, who had seen my interviews and recognized me even in total darkness. "It would be a blessing to invite you to our home" were his words of introduction. I thought I would be walking a bit

longer but it sounded like a good deed for the world so I accepted.

He gathered his family to learn about Yoga and meditation, and he filmed the whole thing from a tripod. I was being recorded non-stop, so closely observed and highly seen that it became hard to bear, but I made it an exercise in dropping the ego, the one who can't bear in the first place. It sort of worked.

Days 65 - 66

April 30th - May 1st

I woke up in total silence: I had been given the whole house to myself. It was a brand new building that nobody lived in yet, so I was even given the task of blessing it with a Baba's housewarming wishes. I don't believe in blind rituals but most definitely in the power of the mind, so I dedicated a meditation to pervading the space with goodwill and wishing all its future occupants a peaceful life. If anything, it made me feel good!

I felt meditative and calm until I met my host, who greeted me with a social-media *Good morning*, his camera held to my face. It was a bit much. Still I behaved, and just thought Metta, Metta, *Bhavatu sabba mangalam*, may all beings be happy... Omm... I will be leaving soon and coming back to the comfort of my vow of silence. So behave.

I did my Taichi morning routine with my host and his camera, then left before sunrise, refusing tea or breakfast. Today was a very significant day: I had taken the *tapasya*, the firm resolution, not to stop for sleep until I would reach my final destination, Dharamshala, my home, exactly 100 kilometers away. Even if that means going hungry, going thirsty, worsening my injured foot and getting there crippled... I already knew it implied a whole night's walk and 40 hours without sleep and I didn't care, in fact I couldn't wait!

We could call it an exercise in stubbornness, never to stop until the goal is reached... or a celebration of long-distance walking, two and a half marathons in one go... or the joy of determination, of testing the limits of one's mind and its capacity to shape the world. These were my last steps, and I was planning to enjoy every 120'000 of them.

The morning walk through Mandi's forested hills was heavenly. I hardly noticed the first 30

kilometers, as if propelled by some unknown force. I briefly snacked on bananas, nuts, milk, and biscuits, some which had been given, some which I had bought on the way, and keep going.

By the time I had done 45 kilometers, I reached the border with my home district Kangra and it was starting to get dark. Once again, I chose to lift the vow of silence at nightfall, but this time for good, as the next day would include reaching Dharamshala, where I had already concluded I would speak.

So it happened to be that my first words were a bland repetition of "Where from, where to, how and why". Wow, lifting the vow took a lot of effort, definitely more than it did to start it eight days ago. Every word I said seemed so unnecessary, mechanical, and tasteless... None of it could compare with the beauty of silence. I missed being able to show my arm and smile instead of answering questions!

I hadn't eaten much at all and had a long night ahead of me, so I counted on having a proper

meal in the town of Baijnath, just after the border into Kangra, before shops would close for the night. But as I reached town, it turns out lockdown rules I wasn't aware of had made everything shut already. Tension grew inside me, as I was really counting on this last meal. With a lot of hassle I found one small shop with the rolling shutter slightly open. I stuck my head inside and saw they had some everyday snack items like biscuits.

"Good evening, can I buy food here?" I shyly asked. "We don't have food." "I don't mean a meal, just biscuits or anything at all I can put in my mouth?" "Sorry, we don't have that." he lied. "Come on, they're just in front of me! I have money. I'm willing to buy them." "Go away!"

Anger is a very rare emotion in my life. But all these circumstances together got to my head. I shouted back, pointing my finger "Ap bee ek din book lagi rahenge! *You too will go hungry one day!*" and I stormed away.

I knew my mindset sucked, but at least I was conscious enough to notice what was going on inside me. Anger is almost unknown to me, why did it hit now?

I guess, as a result of being denied something to eat even though I was hungry. So yes, I definitely had attachment to food... but I was also very familiar with fasting, which I usually enjoyed. So the tough part here was the fact it was intentionally denied.

I kept walking in negativity until I happened to come across another shop with the shutter slightly open. I came closer, doing my best to expect the worst. "Good evening sir. Do you have food?" "Yes, I guess we have something... here, have this packet of biscuits" he said as he handed it to me with a smile. "Thanks but... I'll be walking all night. Can I have, like, much more than that? I have money. I want to pay."

And so it became: five packets of biscuits or salt crackers, half a liter of milk, one liter of water, a sachet of homemade sweets and salt cookies,

and a sweetened milk drink. I tried to pay. He refused. I insisted, I really did. He flatly refused. Thus it started with the same question, but the result was poles apart...

I had my improvised cookie dinner by the roadside in the dark, and started tackling the nightwalk. I felt amazing. Such a haven of peace, not a soul in sight, the road was mine, the stars were mine, I was floating through outer space in pure ecstasy. This otherworldly vastness made up for all the days spent on camera, from selfies to interviews... I was reconnected with my purpose. *This is why I choose to walk.*

I walked straight through midnight, 1 am, 2 am, 3 am... and had a good time observing my funny waves of sleeplessness. My mind would take dips into a hazy muddled hallucinating state where I couldn't even walk straight, and then into a breezy high where I would sing in joy and praise everything around.

Before I knew it, the sky started lightening up and I savored the sun peeking out from behind a line of pine trees in a Switzerland-style river paradise. The lack of sleep was only mildly affecting me, not half as much as the raw energy coming in through all my pores.

As I crossed my first sunlit village, I came to know the night lockdown would be a day lockdown too, and finding food wouldn't be any easier than it was last night: I must rely entirely on people's spontaneous invitations, made secretly from backdoors or anydoors of supposedly closed restaurants and shops. But I also realized that this situation was a real blessing for my walk: I could never have done one hundred kilometers in two days with the amount of time usually spent between selfies and chai invitations when the roadside shops were open. So I embraced the situation with joy. It was a welcome part of the challenge.

60, 70, 80 km... I took every step with careful awareness but the walk was so smooth it was

hard to believe my left foot had been injured for weeks. I'd had days where even 20 km from dawn to dusk was a painful struggle, mixed between Plantar Fasciitis and the poorly bandaged infection on my left foot... and today, possibly by the magic of my *tapasya* - my vow of determination, the universe entirely aligned to make it happen.

I finally reached downtown Dharamshala with the warm feeling of getting home, as every shop and street corner brought back pleasant memories, despite being locked up and deserted for now.

My first encounter with a Tibetan monk was a blessing: he was delighted to see me again and expressed it in his rudimentary English. "You are very good. Very good man!"

Tibet was back into my life and aroused a deep feeling of Buddhist devotion that had been quiet in me since the start of this rather Hindu-focused pilgrimage. But after all, the Buddha was born a Hindu and knew the *Vedas* by

heart... I reached the Dalai Lama's temple residence amongst the usual peace-loving dogs and monkeys, whose minds were imbued with the Dharma in the air.

I prostrated to the temple and merged with the ground, one with the world, blessing its every condition that made this instant possible, this sleepless night successful, this entire journey accomplished.

So much could have gone wrong in the countless hardships, emotional and physical challenges, uncertainty, doubt and fear, disease that put everything at stake, police checks that hung by a thread, politics and border rules that would change from one day to the next... This was an uncompromising test in our faith in the world, and we passed. This was equally an uncompromising test in the goodness of the world, and it passed.

Teacher and student, we both passed together with flying colors. Actually all three of us - Shivaniya, the world, and I, an inseparable trio

whose roles complemented each other like a team.

Reaching my living quarters was a funny moment. All the neighbors had seen the news and welcomed me back. I still had no idea where Shivaniya was: she could be in China for all I knew. As I reached the front door I found a message from her, but instead of giving any kind of news, it was a playful riddle to find the key.

I realized it wasn't my time to know, and it wasn't her intention to tell me. That's what made the beauty of our story together - happy ignorance.

So all I found was the key, and I stepped into my old room in meditative slowness. The space was so clean, pristine, alive, and welcoming... It was the room I'd always known, yet after two months of sleeping outside and living off donations, my values had radically changed and all of this looked like luxury. It is luxury. Running water, electricity, food, a clean floor, a

roof, windows I can open, doors I can close, and a place I can call my own.

I prostrated to the world for its generosity and vowed not to get attached to this kind of comfort nor to take it for granted. To take it as an offering, with thanks and praise for every meal, every shower, every night's sleep, every moment of quiet privacy.

I was also astonished by the number of bags I owned, of clothing, food, tools, technology, musical instruments, bedding, books, survival stuff, so much equipment that it was almost unsettling. I vowed to appreciate what I already had, to use what I needed and cherish every bit of it. Not to throw away my previous life or mindset, but to embrace it with one golden rule: keep it simple.

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About the Author

Benjamin Viatte, haphazardly nicknamed Ben Baba by the Indian media, was born in a cozy Switzerland setting and lovingly tended by a loving family. It seemed he had everything... yet something was missing. Something about the deeper questions that nothing from the outside world could hope to answer: birth, old age, love, loss of loved ones, ego, impermanence, lasting happiness, death...

At his 24th year a dream shook his being, in which these questions were dramatically brought to the surface. After lying in the dark on a stone floor, the troubling void was interrupted by a barefoot monk walking calmly, peace in every step, headed eastwards...

Ben assumed the message was clear enough, and the next morning he started packing his

things to attempt a journey on foot to the Indian Himalayas. He ended up crossing 18 countries and reached his destination Dharamshala 5 years later, after a 14'000 kilometer walk of which he relished every moment.

But does that even matter? Don't we all know the real journey is inwards? And India's the motherland of such a marking spiritual culture that Ben's inner journey has only begun.

*There is no way to happiness -
happiness is the way.*

- Probably Buddha