

Om Namah Shivaya: Answers Within Oneself

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In May of 2016, I visited Rishikesh, India, with Colorado Mountain College, and had a life-changing spiritual experience after creating a portrait with a Sadhu.

The chocolate-milk colored water rushed by the shore in proportions that could wipe out the largest human made structures. The river spanned over 400 feet in width, and enormous temples, shops, and residences bordered the banks of the river. Despite the tremendous volumes of water, the mellow grade of the landscape, and the lack of objects in the water, allowed the river to flow calmly through the city with few ripples visible on the surface. Groups of Indian tourists were chanting after their exhilarating trip down the river in their 16-foot inflatable rafts down the river. An orange hue engulfed the smoke-filled sky as the sun began to set over the horizon. Multitudes of people congregated next to the river to wash their clothes, swim, pray, and send candles down the river as offerings to “Mother Ganga”. This location, next to the Ganges River, served as an important religious site for everyone who visited.

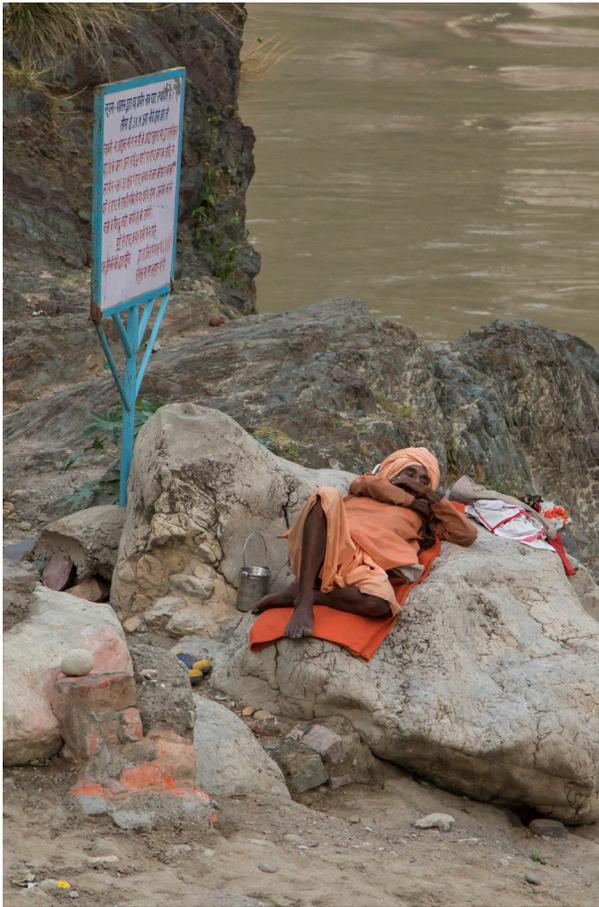
I usually have my camera on hand to capture every moment possible, but I resisted capturing images. All



I could do was observe the beauty of this foreign culture. At times the camera can place a barrier between the photographer and the external environment, and I wanted to remember this moment without the lens. In the distance, I could hear bells ringing, people chanting, and horns honking. The concentration of people was higher than I had experienced in any large city in the United States or Western Europe. The smell of incense, used to fend off flies at fruit stands, mixed with the smell of manure from cattle that roam the streets to create an odor so intense, it almost choked me when I was riding the bus from the airport 16 days earlier. The humidity was near 100%, and the temperature was still in the high 90's, which felt nice after the 114 degree temperatures during the day. This environment felt much different than my home state of Colorado.

I looked over to see a man wearing orange clothes sitting on a rock. He had a grey beard that reached to the middle of his chest and a mustache that spread at least an inch past his cheeks if pulled out straight. Around his neck, he wore two mala necklaces constructed of 108 Rudraksha seeds. These mala necklaces are used so people can focus on their mantra, rather than counting the number of times they repeat the chant. A person recites the mantra for every bead as they pass the beads through their fingers. A pair of clogs sat on the ground, next to the rock, and he perched himself on a thin orange blanket for some padding. This man lay and observed everything around him with an intense gaze.

I recognized this man as a Sadhu, which is a holy man in the Hindu religion. These religious figures give away all their belongings and



devote their entire life to meditation and yoga. They rely on donations so they can pursue their lifelong commitment to this lifestyle. Often, these men embark on pilgrimages across India to visit temples and to pray. Throughout the trip, I wanted to capture a photo of one of these men, but I felt rude trying this without permission.

I continued to observe the scenery around me, and I would occasionally make eye contact with the Sadhu on the rock. It almost felt as if he was focusing on me more than others around him. We exchanged glances a few times then he lay down on the rock. After a few minutes four teenage Indian boys walked next to the Sadhu and stood behind him. They began motioning obscene gestures to this man, then they tore off their clothes down to their underwear and threw them

on the rock the man was sitting on. The boys then jumped into the water to swim and splash each other. I could not believe the disrespect. The Sadhu was aware of what the boys were doing, but he did not act on this and continued to live in his meditative state.

About fifteen minutes later, I gathered enough courage to approach the man to ask if I could make a portrait with him. Unfortunately, I had spent all my rupees and only had two Lara Bars and a Cliff Bar. I offered him the snacks in exchange for a portrait. He reluctantly accepted the offer and allowed me to capture an image of him. He motioned to me to show him the LCD of my screen, and I allowed him to assess the portrait. His hand reached up to his mustache, as he began to straighten out his facial hair. The Sadhu pointed behind me

and directed me to take another shot, so I moved back into position for another portrait. I set up for a shot, focused on his eyes through the camera, and squeezed the shutter button. I showed him the LCD screen again, and he nodded his head up and down in approval. I was so excited to have made a portrait with this religious man. Next, the man looked straight into my eyes with a piercing focus that would not allow my eyes to escape his. He said something to me I could not interpret. I looked at him, confused, and asked him to repeat the mantra again. After asking him two more times, I could feel his slight frustration with my lack of understanding. Instead of asking him again, I found a group of Indian teenagers that I hoped could help me understand what the man was saying.

I asked one of the boys, “Can you tell me what the man is saying?”

He said, “Yes. He is saying the photograph is good. He is telling you an old Hindu mantra ‘Om Namah Shivaya’”.

I replied to the boy, “Thank you very much!”

The man said something to the boy and the boy asked me, “How much did your camera cost? The man wants to know.”

I looked at the camera and thought about its value. The lens and body at retail value add up to \$3,000 USD, which would be 198,000 rupees. I quickly made up a number and told him, “It cost about 70,000 rupees.”

He responded, “Wow that is a lot of

money. You could buy many cars with that.” Then he told the man how much the camera cost, and they spoke Hindi about how much the camera cost.

Next, the boy asked me, “Can my friends and I take a ‘selfie’ with you?”

I told him, “One minute, I want to thank this man.”

I turned to the Sadhu to thank him again. He looked at me again and repeated “Om Namah Shivaya!”, while keeping direct eye contact with me.

I told him, “Thank you! Namaste!”, and I made a prayer motion with my hands.

I then walked away and took a couple of selfies with the teenage boys. They asked me why I was in India, and I told them I was on a study abroad trip with Colorado Mountain College in the United States. They were impressed that a group of us traveled to Rishikesh to observe their culture. I asked the boy that translated for me, “What do you think of the United States?”

He replied, “I like Obama! He seems like a great president and he wants to take care of his people.”

Unexpectedly, the intern of our trip, Adrienne, shouted, “Hey Jeff! It is getting dark! We have to go.”

I reluctantly agreed, told the boys I was leaving, and returned with the group to the hotel. The entire time I had been conversing with the teenagers, the Sadhu had kept eye contact with me. I could hear his mantra without him saying a word. At the time, I did not know what the mantra meant, but his

words continued to resonate with me. Even though the Sadhu and I did not speak the same language, he instilled his wisdom on a random western man with no religious beliefs.

When I returned to the United States, I researched the mantra “Om Namah Shivaya.” I discovered the saying translates to “I bow to Shiva!”, and Shiva is considered the inner self or god. This can also be translated to “I honor the divinity within myself”. I am not a religious person, but I do feel we are all connected as humans. I took his wisdom to tell me to focus on myself rather than the mate-

rial things in life like my camera or expensive clothing. Improving oneself leads to improving others, which is especially important when trying to influence people to make changes in their everyday behavior. The experience with this Sadhu will forever remind me that the best way to alter the outside world is to change ourselves internally. Even though I do not believe in organized religion, the experience with this Sadhu encouraged me to reconsider my spiritual beliefs, and I will continue to search within myself for these answers.

