

Yoga ~ Adventures in an Ashram: taking time out to tune in

Contributed by Lila (Alice) Flynn

Retreat.

The word rests atop of this article like a sticky bun, ready to be eaten, every mouthful experienced, to be taken deep within, enjoyed, digested and absorbed. A retreat offers us nourishment, soul food. Inadequate a metaphor as it may be, I'm going to go with it, largely because I feel I can't pin down my own retreat to a simple description. And, just as there's a whole bakery of cakes out there, so too are there many different types of retreats and each will be experienced in different ways by different people. So, with that in mind, I'll simply tell you a bit about mine... It's July 2008 and the sun is working hard to keep us hot at the Satchidananda Ashram, Yogaville, Virginia. We're all making our way through the woods to the beautiful LOTUS Shrine – an interfaith monument in the shape of its namesake, painted to perfection in pink and blue hues, a building dedicated to peace. We take this walk down to LOTUS every morning at around 11.30. Sometimes skittish deer, tiny shiny snakes or enormous brightly-coloured butterflies join us. We arrive in time to the sound of bells signaling noon meditation. Inside the shrine, we twenty five TTs sit. Please note, TT is not an abbreviation relating to a type of meditation we could quite easily be attempting: Transcendental Tryingreallyhardtoquietenthemind. TT is the affectionate ashram term given to Teacher Trainees. We've all decided, for a myriad of reasons, to retreat from our everyday lives and to train to become teachers of Integral Yoga.

The sun may be blazing daily, but things are hotting up in all sorts of other ways. With an intense daily schedule running six days a week, many of us are learning and experiencing new things on all levels. We meditate at 6 am daily, followed by a Yoga class. Next comes breakfast, then lectures in all aspects of Yoga from Hatha theory, Raja (the philosophy of Yoga), anatomy and physiology, Yogic diet and more. After a busy morning, and with an afternoon and evening of lectures ahead of us, the break for midday meditation is most welcome. We then come together in Sivananda Hall, the main hall, for lunch: a 'help yourself' canteen of vegetarian fare prepared by Karma Yogis, skilled at cooking up feasts for the masses. And I feel grateful. I constantly feel grateful at the Ashram, for the supportive environment in which we can engage in such intense study, to the staff who teach and support us, to those who cook and clean for us, to all the ashram community who, from day one, have made us feel welcome and given us countless gifts of smiles, hugs, conversation, friendship and love. Love is everywhere at the ashram. Even if the sun had not been shining so brightly, the kindness, care, dedication, commitment and good humour of all those I met whilst in Yogaville (that really is its name!) could easily have lit up the sky. That's not to say that people didn't have differences of opinion, but rather that there was space for that. There was space everywhere and not simply in the incredible landscape around us; the Yogic lifestyle provided us with a safe space in which to explore ourselves. It seemed to allow us to breathe out a sigh of relief, to release whatever needed to be released be it emotions, unhealthy or hurtful habits or thinking patterns; in this space, we were able to expand. Retreat, the dictionary tells me, is to take refuge. Sometimes the responsibilities and routines of life may squash us. A retreat can offer us a space in which we can just be, away from distractions. In my taking refuge at the ashram, the teacher training gave me highly practical tools to enable me to 'just be' wherever I am. I'm not saying I've found the balance yet and I'm not saying it doesn't take practice - studying the Yoga Sutras taught me that nurturing one's inner peace takes exactly that: practice and dedication. But my experiences at the ashram prepared me for this too. The course taught me, in so many useful ways, how to open myself up to the peace within and how to integrate these ways into daily life. I may not be up at 6 am everyday, on the mat and meditating. But at some point in the day, I do try to get there or to read something to inspire me or I pray or write in my journal or do just some one thing that helps me to feel more connected to a greater peace, one thing that supports me in my spiritual journey. And whilst I practise practising, I think of my course mates, all over the world, all doing the same. This gives me strength and, once again, I feel grateful. After a life-changing retreat, every single day, life seems richer, my heart is happier and my eyes are wider with delight. It might be that you feel unable to take a month long retreat or perhaps even a weekend might seem too much; I'd like to suggest that we all make time for a retreat in our daily life. Just five minutes a day: five minutes meditating, five minutes outside in the fresh air, five minutes spending time with a loved one, five minutes painting, laughing, dancing, playing. Five minutes spent nurturing your inner peace. Is there a finer way to spend five? Think of it like that nourishing soul food sticky bun, sat there on the table, calling out to you, waiting for you. Go on, (re)treat yourself… Photograph of 'Three in A Tree' © Sraddha Van Dyke 2008, reproduced with thanks Text and all other photographs © Lila (Alice) Flynn 2008 Lila (Alice) Flynn is a certified Integral Yoga Teacher, theatre practitioner, writer and drama facilitator working in and around Bournemouth, Dorset. Lila currently teaches Hatha Yoga on Monday evenings at The Zen Zone, Parkstone (01202 741 391) and children's Yoga within local schools. For more information on the Satchidananda Ashram-Yogaville visit: <http://www.yogaville.org> For local yoga classes and monthly satsang (community gathering): <http://www.integralyogadorset.org>