

YOGI AND SHAMAN DANCE IN THE FIRE

Patricia J. Heavren

Last night I took part in a Vedic fire ceremony without my usual companions of rattle and drum. Instead I sat in circle with masters of a sister tradition, Tantra yoga, as offerings of grain and ghee were placed into a fire as familiar to me as it was foreign. My journey to becoming a shaman began as a yogi, and the accompanying desire to renounce all things earthly, or at least all things earthly that weren't working the way I wanted.

It began the very first night of 200 hour yoga teacher training. A time when life was challenging, and the only respite to be found was my yoga mat. Beneath the gaze of life-sized statues of Shiva and Krishna that seemed poised to oversee sixty of us in various twists, bends and bandhas, I listened with closed eyes as our teachers guided us through a process to meet our practice companion for the training, our sadhana partner. As I opened my eyes my gaze locked with a metaphor, a vision-glimpse that at the time I did not fully understand. I saw beyond the faces of potential partner-classmates, and instead, I *saw* the earth. Recognition revealed that I had been using my yoga practice to escape from the world, my world, as I was holding it.

Of course precious gifts were gained as I fled from the drama of my life through my asana practice. Yoga blessed

me with me full-on access to a deep inner sanctum. Yoga helped to establish and cultivate stillness and strength in my being. It filled me with a peace I had long chased to ease the pain that life kept serving up, in small and large portions. On that initial night of yoga teacher training, life shifted. I opened my eyes to discover that my sadhana partner was the earth herself, the humanity I had been desperately running from. In that instant, I was being offered the choice to no longer struggle against gravity in my longing to touch the divine.

As I sat last night by the fire built into the belly of suburban Connecticut earth, I remembered where that choice had taken me. Pulled forward by the draw of the earth-vision that still dangled in my mind's eye, I was initiated into the medicine practices and wisdom teachings of the Laika fire shamans who once inhabited the Peruvian Andes. As I sat by this fire I could hear the voice of my teacher, Alberto Villoldo, medical anthropologist, author, shaman, and founder of the Four Winds Society, speak of the lore that traced the Andean masters back to the Himalayas, where they once shared a singular body of knowledge. I remembered the moment I received an initial rite of passage where he looked into my eyes and awakened my own capacity to heal myself and others. A right relation in the making, as I was to later join him in teaching these practices to other students in the very same room, and

under the very same gaze of Shiva and Krishna, where I first stretched out my mat and my soul to become a yoga teacher.

Flames crackled and danced again, and I was brought back to present time, sacred time. Svaha...so be it...Svaha...so be it...chanted over and over with greater vigor as the remaining offerings were fed to the flames. Yogi and shaman were now dancing together. I could *see* them. There was the shaman calling the four winds, the four directions of earthly perspective that mapped our relationship to the great star of our solar system, the great fire in the sky. The shaman called on the expansion of the rising sun; the sustaining force of the midday sun; the contraction of the setting sun; and the seeming absence of light in the void of night to affect healing for individuals and communities.

I *saw* the shaman's summoning of the four winds as the practice of pranayama on a grand and global scale. It was harnessing what the advanced yogi has always known about the healing power of the breath: the power of inhalation, retention of fullness, exhalation, and emptiness from the breath held out. I saw in the fire the faces of the aspects of god known to the yogi: creator, sustainer, and destroyer. All of these dancing up from the dark, receptive, carved out hollow of the earth herself that held them.

I felt as if I had slipped into that hollow, a crack between the worlds where form turned to formlessness, linear time to the timeless. I realized that the epic journey to gain knowledge had finally led me home. Home was the belly of the mother that held the fire. Home was where I greeted my own flaws, disappointments, and resentments with genuine gratitude and loving kindness. With my knowledge of the four winds of the breath and of the four corners of the ecosphere of the earth, I had used the compass of my inner world to discover compassion for my own humanity. This is what the Tantric yogi and the shaman have always known.

The final svaha uttered into silence, I heard a baby cry in the distance, and a world of traffic and movement whir beyond the confines of an ordinary fenced backyard that no longer felt ordinary. Sounds of the earth, pairs of eyes, a single soul reflected in the fire. Agni, the Sanskrit word for fire, danced into ayni, the Q'echua (indigenous language of the Andes) word for right relationship. So close were these two paths that each language could barely hide the distinctions. So close were these paths within me, I could no longer hide from their joining.

I knew I would see these two together in every fire thereafter. They would be found in the fires that would burn in ceremonies and on the shores of the Ganges at

gatherings like the Kumbha Mela, where sadhus, sages and pilgrims gather every 12 years for inner healing and lasting world change. They would be seen dancing in the fires shamans circled with rattles and drums. They would be in the sacred fires that burned in ordinary backyards. All of these fires would join to awaken a new earth, a new mankind, living in the fullest expression of limitlessness. Svaha meets Agni. Full surrender...where it is not only *seen*, but *experienced*. This is the consciousness where heaven and earth dwell together. This is the fire where the divine and the human, the yogi and the shaman dance.

Svaha, so be it.

Patricia J. Heavren is an energy medicine practitioner, life coach, business consultant and senior teaching faculty with the international Four Winds Society's Light Body School. She works with clients world-wide from her Connecticut office, and can be reached at www.energymedicinewellness.com. Information on the international Light Body training is available at www.thefourwinds.com.