

CBSG, WAZA, CZA: working towards the BEST EVER conferences in India ... but watch out when its time to leave! Sally Walker, Editor

In the last day of October and first several days of November, New Delhi will finally get over its anticipation, and settle down to watch zoo people from around the world enjoy meetings, break-out groups, workshops, conference, speakers, presentations, and more such august proceedings. Less august but very fascinating for western visitors -- alien food, heartburn, new kinds of buildings and houses, crazy drivers, busy streets, disobedient citizens, lovely women, bright delightful saris, brilliant and colorful fruit and vegetable stands, worry that they forgot their Potassium Permanganate, fumbling with rupees and sheer amazement, bewilderment, confusion, shock and awe, as they view both elegance and its opposite...

Then there is the amusing drama of Indians and westerners trying to converse with each other in their own country or regional accent. While many Indians know numerous languages, including English, the western visitors are often stuck with one language and they are speaking the English.

Despite that awkward state, many visitors will make lots of friends and, if they are anything like me, they will feel overwhelmed with an urge to weep ... for joy, for love, for the awesome realization that we in the world have no one but one another and we are one world.

Of course, that is the first phase ... falling in love with India and its flies, potholes, malnourished dogs etc. Those who go away -- back to their "native place" (as they say in India), for a few days or even weeks, will continue feeling they are walking on air. Timeline is dependent on the size and power of the spiritual bullet that has stricken them, and then the feeling gradually will slip away.

Others may not be so fortunate ... they go back to their own country and languish in pain for having abandoned what they now perceive as their THEIR native place. They save their money for going back to India to become yogis, mystics, or pipe addicts.

The last variety of westerners is the small group that postpone and keep on postponing day by day their return "home" and stay in India. They disregard visa deadlines, parental sensitivities and no money. They become addicted to India and cannot leave until they are forced to so by visa problems, ill health, etc.

I was in that category, sort of. I didn't go to India for a conference or holiday. I actually went to study yoga and pranayama. I had happened onto a guy doing amazing yoga on Venice Beach in California, where I lived right by the ocean with my husband and cats. I was fond of being a lost soul and a searcher for truth. When I saw this American yogi I approached him. He called himself Raju and he wanted to teach yoga in Venice. He and his wife needed accommodation for a yoga studio and home. My husband and I had a flat above us that was empty

and in no time the yoga studio and yogi home was established. Raju accepted me as his student and the worst and best days of my life began. He did genuine, *Astanga* yoga where the master not only demonstrated the postures, he worked your muscle bones into them. There are no words for the pain but I was hooked!

A few months later Raju brought *his* teacher over. After a few agonizing lessons I wanted to study with Raju's master in India! My long-suffering husband provided a round-trip ticket to Mysore. I flew to Mysore, India and was welcomed by my teacher, the real thing. Sri K. Pathabi Jois, who taught Sanscrit at the college and yoga at his home. He was much worse than Raju and there were days that I was sure my body was broken forever, yet I survived to study 7 odd years and I was one that could not leave!

During those 7 years I received many letters from husband and parents demanding that I come home to USA. My air ticket had a deadline and I ignored it. I ran out of money but found a "sponsor". Somehow through those years I always got my 6 months visa renewed which assured me that I was doing the will of a higher power.

One day after my 7 year love-affair with yoga and *pranayama* my teacher up and went to USA to teach in California and I stayed. During that time I met Vasunti, daughter of a friend, and she invited me to the Mysore Zoo where she worked as a vet. I'd never been to a zoo and she took me around. When we reached the tiger cages, she asked the keeper to let me hold a 6 weeks old cub. That was Devine ... and I wanted more. Next day I returned and the keeper recognized me. Through sign language he conveyed that he wanted me to keep the playful cub while he cleaned the cage so that it couldn't bite his ankles. When he put that tiger cub in my arms, I saw God, and my zoo career (or obsession) began. No more yoga...only zoos. I was hooked. **I became one of those people who could not leave India (!)** ... at least on my own steam.

To wind this up to fit a page, my visa expired and no rescuer materialized that time. I had to leave for at least 6 months before I could get another visa. I enjoyed USA friends and parents, but I was on a flight back to India 6 months later! This became my lifestyle along with my zoo fetish for over 35 years. Now I have a 10 year visa and could stay in India all the time, but my very elderly parents needed me and now I am elderly as well. I realized during that time that America is easier than India, particularly when you are hitting 70 years. Now I visit India for a month 2-3 times yearly and the other months I live in my late parents house with my two cats.

This is a warning (or a hint) to all CZA guests that India can besot and kidnap you before you know what is happening. **So beware ... or go ahead...its God's country, after all!**