

will flow like warm beer from the tap? George Orwell was skeptical of this approach: "Nearly all creators of utopia have resembled the man who has a toothache and therefore thinks happiness consists in not having a toothache."

He's right. Surely, happiness is not merely "the absence of suffering," as that über-pessimist Schopenhauer believed, but the *presence* of something. But what? And can you make places change or, like the old joke about psychiatrists and lightbulbs, does the place have to *want* to change first?

In Slough, I can't avoid the facts. The viral theory of happiness never took hold. The Slough fifty may have learned a thing or two about happiness, but the message never spread very far. Does that mean that the viral theory is flawed? I don't think so. It's simply a matter of numbers. Plant enough happiness seeds—people like Richard Hill and Heather White and Veronica Puglia—and eventually the laws of exponential growth kick in. A tipping point is reached, and happiness, I believe, will spread like a California brush fire.

So what to do in the meantime? I suppose we continue planting seeds. Besides, it is the planting that matters, not the harvest. As many philosophers have noted, happiness is a by-product. Happiness is, as Nathaniel Hawthorne observed, the butterfly that alights on our shoulder, unbidden.

So, instead of actively trying to make places, or people, happier, perhaps we'd be better off heeding the advice of Canadian author Robertson Davies: "If you are not happy you had better stop worrying about it and see what treasures you can pluck from your own brand of unhappiness."

Put that way, I see frumpy old Slough in a whole new light. It is no longer a much-maligned Berkshire town, the butt of jokes, but rather a treasure trove of unhappiness, just waiting to be plucked.

Chapter 9

INDIA

Happiness Is a Contradiction

Some places are like family. They annoy us to no end, especially during the holidays, but we keep coming back for more because we know, deep in our hearts, that our destinies are intertwined.

For me, that place is India. I hate it. I love it. Not alternately but *simultaneously*. For if there is anything this seductive, exasperating country teaches us it is this: It's possible to hold two contradictory thoughts at the same time and, crucially, to do so without your head exploding. Indians do it all the time.

As he boarded a flight for Bombay in 1958, Hungarian-born writer Arthur Koestler said he wanted "to look at the predicament of the West from a different perspective, a different spiritual latitude." Yes, that's it! I thought, when I read those words. A different spiritual latitude or, as author Jeffrey Paine puts it, "an alternative track through modernity"—and, he might have added, directly to happiness.

When Koestler disembarked in Bombay, though, the heat and the stench of raw sewage made him feel as if "a wet, smelly diaper was being wrapped around my head by some abominable joker." One might conclude that India disappointed Koestler, but I don't think that's true. India does not disappoint. It captivates, infuriates, and, occasionally, contaminates. It never disappoints.

I always wanted to be a foreign correspondent, and India was certainly foreign. So when NPR offered me the chance to live and

One grumpy writer.
Ten countries.
Will any of them make him happy?

Many authors have attempted to describe what happiness is; fewer have shown us *where* it is, what we can learn from the inhabitants of different cultures, and how changing your location can change your mood. Now in this enlightening book, Eric Weiner, a self-described mope and longtime foreign correspondent for National Public Radio, travels to some of the world's most contented places. Full of inspired moments and earned epiphanies, this riveting book will make you happier as you visit.

- India, where happiness and misery live side-by-side
- Bhutan, where the king has made Gross National Happiness a national priority
- Switzerland, where residents believe envy is the great enemy of happiness
- Iceland, which, despite being cold, remote, and full of failure, is among the world's happiest places—and for good reason, the author finds.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF *Bliss*

"Think *Don Quixote* with a dark sense of humor... Happiness is reading a book as entertaining as this."

—Tony Horwitz, author of *Confederates in the Attic*

"By turns hilarious and profound, this is the kind of book that could change your life."

—Henry Alford, author of *Municipal Bondage* and *Big Kiss*

Tell us what place makes you
happiest at www.TwelveBooks.com.

GEOGRAPHY OF BLISS T
ISBN13 978-0-446-19963-6
ISBN10 0-446-19963-X
定価 ¥2,856 円 C0409
洋書(本体) ¥2,720+5%税
9780446199636
192C*39J27202
ノン・ブックス
www.yohan.co.jp YOHAN

International Edition

TRAVEL

THE GEOGRAPHY OF *Bliss*
One Grump's Search for
the Happiest Places in the World
ERIC WEINER

One Grump's Search for
the Happiest Places in the World

THE GEOGRAPHY OF

Bliss

ERIC WEINER

Correspondent,

National Public Radio

"Laugh. Think. Repeat.

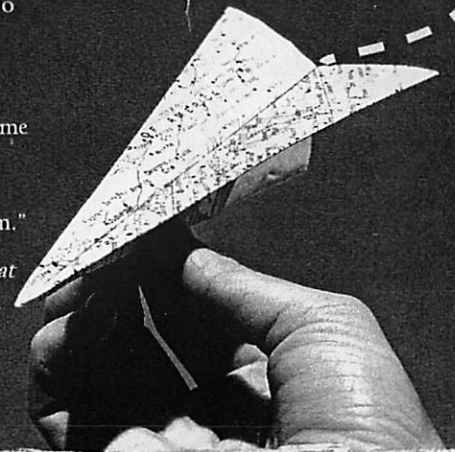
Repeatedly. If someone told me

this book was this good,

I wouldn't have believed them."

—Po Bronson, author of *What*

Should I Do with My Life?



work there, I jumped at it, even though I had never set foot in India. I knew little about the country beyond the usual clichés of snake charmers and desperate poverty.

So on one December day in 1993, contrary to all common sense, I arrived at Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi, hauling two trunks stuffed with tape recorders and notebooks and a few articles of climatically inappropriate clothing.

As a correspondent, I covered weighty topics like economic reforms, nuclear proliferation, and an outbreak of bubonic plague that belied India's claims that it was on the path to modernity. Of course, I was aware of the *other* India—the India of gurus and miracles—and occasionally this India rose to the level of news, like that morning I awoke to find the “milk miracle” sweeping the nation.

Wandering the narrow streets of Delhi's Paharganj neighborhood, the backpacker district, I'd see the lama lickers, disheveled travelers who scrimped every *rupee* and rarely bathed. But they had a luxury I did not have: time. They spent months lounging on beaches in Goa, getting stoned, or hiking the Himalayas, getting stoned. When they weren't getting stoned, they dabbled in spirituality by attending one of India's many ashrams. What exactly transpired inside these spiritual retreats remained a mystery. I heard stories of group sex and enlightenment, too. As a serious journalist, though, I couldn't justify a trip there. I left India after two years without once stepping inside an ashram. I felt cheated.

And so I've returned to India, this time with a different agenda, a happiness agenda. And with a question I desperately needed to answer: Why do so many presumably sane westerners leave their wealthy, functional nations behind and travel to a poor and dysfunctional nation in search of bliss? Are they romanticizing the east, falling for charlatans with flowing beards? Or did the nineteenth-century scholar Max Mueller get it right when he said that, by going to India, we are returning to our “old home,” full of memories, if only we can read them?

* * *

Every time I return to India—about once a year—it is different yet the same. Yes, there's now a McDonald's at my favorite market in Delhi, but around the corner is the shop that sells statues of Ganesh. Yes, there are cellphones and ATMs and Internet cafés, but none has made a dent in the bedrock of Indian culture. These latest foreign intruders are no different from the Mughals or the British or any of the other interlopers who over the centuries tried to subdue the subcontinent. India always emerged victorious, not by repelling these invaders but by subsuming them.

The Taj Mahal is today considered the quintessential Indian icon, yet it was built by a seventeenth-century Mughal emperor who at the time wasn't Indian at all. He is now. Likewise, McDonald's caved to the Indian palate and, for the first time, dropped Big Macs and all hamburgers from its menu, since Hindus don't eat beef. Instead, it serves McAloo Tikki and the McVeggie and a culinary hybrid, the Paneer Salsa Wrap. McDonald's didn't change India, as some feared. India changed McDonald's.

And so it is with western travelers who seek their happiness here. Even before the Beatles meditated with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi on the banks of the Ganges, foreigners have been drawn to India. Annie Besant, E. M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood, Martin Luther King Jr., and many others. Some came in search of solutions to political problems back home. Others wanted to transcend their pedestrian, earthly existence, if only for a moment, and taste the eternal. Some just wanted to chill. This despite the fact that India is not a particularly happy place, according to Ruut Veenhoven and his database. Looking for bliss in a land of misery? A contradiction? Yes. And no.

I'd heard of a new, popular guru named Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. He has long, silky black hair and a serene smile. He is a mainstream guru, if such a thing is possible.

Sri Sri's ashram is located just outside of Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley. Bangalore is New India, the India of call centers and shopping malls—"India Shining," as one political party calls it. Many of the city's software engineers and call-center workers—cybercoolies, as they're called—escape to the ashram whenever they can. New India turns to Old India for salvation or, at least, for a bit of downtime.

Driving to the ashram in a taxi, we pass cows, dogs, meat hanging from hooks, tailor shops, a gleaming office building for Oracle, a sign for "Speak Easy English." We pass an auto-rickshaw, one of those three-wheeled menaces that buzz around India's cities like swarms of killer bees. Its black exhaust makes me cough. I see a sign for "Asia's Most Advanced Super Specialty Hospital." The disease and the cure. India has it all. One-stop shopping.

Finally, we arrive at the ashram, entering through a white archway, and suddenly we're in a little Garden of Eden, lush and green with fresh mangos and bananas growing everywhere. It seems blissfully quiet. Perhaps that is the secret of the Indian ashram. Maybe they're not exceptionally peaceful places but only seem so compared to the cacophony outside their gates.

Reception is basic, not as friendly as I expected. Nobody hugs me or, for that matter, seems to care much that I'm here. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, or Guru-ji, as he's called respectfully, is everywhere. There's a big photo of him behind the reception counter and another one across the room. He's also on a big projection TV.

An officious woman hands me a form and asks me to fill it out. One question asks if I have ever sought psychological counseling. I lie and check no. Under occupation, I write consultant. Another lie, in case they don't like the idea of a journalist sniffing around their ashram. I briefly wonder if lying on my ashram application form is a bad idea, karmically speaking, but that thought vanishes just as quickly as it arrived.

The ashram is entirely self-contained, a cruise ship for the soul. There is no reason to leave. Everything you need is here: food, laundry, ATM, pharmacy, Internet café. Everything, I was quickly learning, except for irony, which is scarce indeed.

I walk down a manicured path, lugging my suitcase. A sign says "Please only touch the flowers with your eyes." I pass a few people. They seem calm, alarmingly so. I say hello. They respond with "*Jai Guru Dev.*" A strange greeting, I think. Later, I learned it means "Victory to the Big Mind." I'm not sure who has the big mind, us or Guru-ji.

I change into loose-fitting clothing, ashram wear, and walk down a steep path to the dining hall. I take off my shoes and leave them outside with the dozens of others. A man plops supervegetarian food (no dairy or onions or garlic) on my plate, and I take a seat. Except there are no seats to be taken. Everyone is sitting on the floor. Some people are natural floor sitters, their legs curling into the lotus position with consummate ease. I am not one of these people.

A holy man, or *sadhu*, sits next to me. He is dressed in saffron, with a long, flowing beard and a vertical slash of charcoal on his forehead. "*Jai Guru Dev,*" he says. He prays silently, palms together, then begins to eat. He does so expertly, scooping up the rice and lentils in easy, fluid motions. I am less graceful. I spill half my food on my lap. More food dribbles down my chin. A few lentils find their way into my mouth, purely by chance. I feel ridiculous. I can understand someone who has eaten with their hands all their life struggling with the transition to knife and fork, but what could be more instinctual, more human, than eating food with one's hands?

Someone comes up to me and taps me on the shoulder. For a moment, I think he might be dispensing spiritual advice—this is an ashram, after all—but his advice, it turns out, is far more practical. He informs me that I should use only my right hand to eat with. The left hand is used for other bodily purposes.

I see some people wearing T-shirts that say "Commitment to service is the key to happiness." Actually, the research backs them up. People who volunteer regularly are, statistically, happier than

those who don't. I briefly consider pointing this out to them but then drop the idea. An Indian ashram is no place for statistics.

Walking out of the dining hall, I notice a bulletin board with posters highlighting Guru-ji's expanding empire of bliss. There's the Sri Sri Journalism School and the Sri Sri School of Management. Instantly, the term "management guru" springs to mind. I chuckle to myself, except it's not to myself. It's out loud. No one cares, though. That is the beauty of life in an ashram. You can suddenly burst out laughing—or crying or regressing to infantile behavior or hopping madly on one foot—and no one bats an eye. It's okay. At the ashram, everything is okay. Except, I was to learn, disrespecting Guru-ji. That is definitely not okay.

The ashram's main temple looks like a giant three-tiered wedding cake with a big blue lightbulb on top. Inside, it's all white marble and arches. On the stage is a picture of Guru-ji. It's huge, at least four feet high, resting on a sort of throne and looped with a big garland of flowers. The white marble is cool and feels nice on my bare feet.

The overall effect, though, is borderline lurid—too many pink, flowery things on the ceiling, and the entrance to the temple is bookended by two five-foot-high swans. That, along with the trash cans shaped like bunnies, create a vaguely Disney-like atmosphere.

There's a small musical troupe sitting on the floor near Guri-ji's photo. "*Shiva om, Shiva om,*" the singers chant. People around me start to move, slowly at first, but as the tempo increases, the dancing grows feverish. Some people start twirling and spinning wildly. Others hold hands. And me? I resort to my default mode and simply observe. It disturbs me that I can't loosen up, not even here. Then again, I just arrived, I tell myself. Give yourself time.

It's mostly Indians at the ashram. Stressed-out IT workers from Bangalore. One woman came to town from a neighboring state. She was hoping to enroll in an Oracle software course, but it was full so she enrolled at the ashram instead. Software or spirituality. In India, they are interchangeable.

There are a few foreigners here, too, and I meet two: Elsa from Portugal and Eva from the Dominican Republic. They are ashram hopping. They just spent two weeks at Sai Baba's ashram, not far from here. Living conditions there were much rougher, they tell me. The rules were strict and enforced by burly men wearing white scarves. And there were none of the luxuries found on this ashram. I can't imagine of which luxuries they speak. My shower has no hot water, and at dinner everyone washes his or her own dishes, which is fine but hardly luxurious. Yet what they sacrificed in material comfort they gained in spiritual payoff.

"We saw amazing things," says Elsa, somewhat mysteriously.

"Swami calls you. You don't go to him. He summons you," says Eva.

Eva seems flummoxed by the paucity of information at this ashram.

"No one has told us where to go," she says to one of the ashram officials, an edge of panic creeping into her voice. "We have been given no information." She seems awfully tense for someone who just spent two weeks at an ashram—and besides, isn't the whole idea to find information for ourselves and not be told what to do?

Today is our first session. There are about thirty of us in the class, called the Art of Living, and just a few foreigners: myself, Elsa, and Eva. We're sitting on the floor, of course. Our teacher is an Indian woman named Ami. She's a former corporate executive. Now she and her husband travel the world, spreading the word of Guru-ji. She's sitting lotus-style on a raised platform so that she is slightly higher than the rest of us. She's wearing a long flowing *salwar khammeez* and a smile that is the most serene I've seen since Thailand.

We start by introducing ourselves. No problem, I think. Except we're supposed to say "I belong to you" to everyone in our class, one at a time. This makes me uncomfortable. I just met these

people. How can I belong to them? I go through with it, mumbling the "I belong to you" part. Next, we're told the ashram rules.

Rule number one: wear loose clothing.

No problem.

Rule number two: no alcohol for the next three days.

Slight problem. I'll miss my evening glass of wine but figure I can go for three days without and compensate later.

And the last rule: absolutely no coffee or tea or caffeine of any kind.

Big problem. This rule hits me like a sucker punch and surely would have knocked me to the floor had I not been sitting there already. I'm eyeing the exits, plotting my escape. I knew enlightenment came at a price, but I had no idea the price was this steep. A sense of real panic sets in. How am I going to survive for the next seventy-two hours without a single cup of coffee?

Ami doesn't smell my fear or at least doesn't let on. She's moving on to the next exercise: a guided meditation. I've dabbled in meditation in the past but have always found the silence unsettling. In radio, silence is something to be avoided at all costs. Sure, I'd insert a second or two of silence for dramatic effect, but any more than that is a signal that something has gone terribly wrong. That's why it's called dead air.

And counting breaths? Can't do it. In my mind, each breath brings me one step closer to death, and why would you want to count down to your own death?

Ami pushes a button on a CD player, and Guru-ji's voice, high-pitched and serene, fills the room. "You are at peace with your environment now. Be grateful for this wonderful body, this instrument."

My instrument is a bit out of tune, and as for wonderful? Yes, in 1987. But I get the idea. We should be grateful to be alive. Our eyes are supposed to be closed, but I cheat and open them for a second. Ami's smile is radiant; she's glowing. There's no other word for it. That should be proof enough that Guru-ji is on to something, that the ashram is for real, yet I can't seem to jettison my doubts.

At the same time, some of Guru-ji's words, channeled through Ami, ring true: "We keep postponing happiness. We can only experience happiness now. The present moment is inevitable." I like that last bit a lot. It's much better than that old dharma refrain, "Be here now," which always struck me as too much of an imperative, an order. "I said, 'Be here now, God damn it!'" But if the present moment is inevitable, then, well, I might as well embrace it.

Ami continues: "Ask a child to choose chocolate or peace of mind, and they will choose the chocolate. But an adult? Probably the peace of mind." Unless that adult lives in Switzerland, I think. There, chocolate *is* peace of mind.

We're on a break, so I take the opportunity to chat with a few of the Indians in my class. Most work in the IT field, and they put in long hours. The Art of Living course appeals to them (even the acronym AOL says high-tech) because it gives them a jolt of spirituality without requiring a lifelong sacrifice. They don't have to become *sanyasis*, those who renounce all their worldly possessions and pursue a purely spiritual life. All Guru-ji requires from his disciples is a three-day weekend.

I tell them about my search for the world's happiest places, about Ruut Veenhoven and his database. If anyone would understand, surely it is these people of the microchip. Yet I am met with furrowed brows and looks of incredulity.

"Why would you want to quantify happiness?" asks Binda, a software engineer.

It's a disarmingly simple question, and I don't have a good answer. I've spent much time pondering whether we *can* measure happiness but not much thought to whether we *should* measure it.

Many of these people have lived abroad, but they keep coming back to India. Why?

"Unpredictability," they say, almost in unison.

It's a surprising answer. We in the west think of unpredictability as a menace, something to be avoided at all costs. We want our careers, our family lives, our roads, our weather to be utterly predictable. We love nothing more than a sure thing. Shuffling

the songs on our iPod is about as much randomness as we can handle.

But here is a group of rational software engineers telling me that they like unpredictability, crave it, can't live without it. I get an inkling, not for the first time, that India lies at a spiritual latitude beyond the reach of the science of happiness.

At dinner, I find Eva and Elsa engaged in a decadent activity. They're sitting on chairs. Flimsy plastic chairs, but, still, they're off the floor, and that seems like the height of luxury. A handwritten sign says the chairs are reserved for "the elderly and international visitors." Nonfloor people. I am grateful when they ask me to join them.

Eva tells me that at the other ashram we couldn't be talking like this, on the floor or anywhere else. Men and women were segregated. "Sai Baba wants you to focus on your spiritual development and not on your"—she pauses and makes a sweeping motion toward her pelvis—"not on your body consciousness." That's no problem, I think. The daily cold shower has pretty much taken care of my body consciousness.

Today is the big day. We're going to learn the *sudarshan kriya* breathing technique. This is the centerpiece of the course, the HOV lane to bliss. We take our places on the floor, and, once again, I contort myself into the lotus position. Ami tells us to remove any leather we're wearing, even watchbands, since "leather is dead skin, and it restricts the flow of *pranha*." *Pranha* means "energy," and it's a word that, along with "toxins," you hear a lot at any ashram. I don't deny the presence of either, but the terms are used so loosely as to be virtually meaningless. I cringe every time I hear them.

Everyone is a bit nervous. We've heard about this breathing technique, but the details have been kept secret. Ami tells us to "let your feelings go, don't hold back, and if you hear someone laughing or crying, don't stare. That is *their* experience. *They* are

having an experience, not you." This concerns me. What are we about to do that would provoke such strong emotional reactions? I'm really not in the mood for this. It's been twenty-four hours since I've had a caffeine fix, and I'm feeling awfully grumpy.

We do the exercise, and it's really nothing so bizarre—sort of like snoring only when you're awake. Afterward, we lie on our backs for ten minutes. The woman next to me is moaning and sounds like she's in pain. I'm a bit worried and briefly consider opening my eyes to see what's going on, but that is *her* experience, so I don't.

Finally, we're told to open our eyes and return to the lotus position. Afterward, we share (another popular ashram word) our experiences. Eva pipes up first: "I've never experienced anything like that before. I saw many faces, including that of Guru-ji. He must be here with us now." Everyone applauds.

"I lost control," says someone else.

"I no longer have a headache," says a third, to more applause.

"I went away. I don't know where I went, but I was gone," says someone who has clearly returned from wherever she went.

Elsa, though, had the most dramatic experience. "I saw fireworks in my mind's eye with blues and reds, every color of the spectrum. And I felt sparks in my lower legs, as if electricity was shooting up them."

I experienced no such pyrotechnics. Yes, I feel a bit light-headed, a bit moody, but that might be due to the lack of caffeine and circulation to my legs, thanks to all this sitting on the floor. What is wrong with me? Where are my spiritual fireworks?

Then there is Satish, a skinny software engineer. He fell asleep during the exercise and is still sleeping after we have shared. Someone shakes Satish, but he's in a deep, deep sleep and won't wake. The session is over. It's time to leave, but he's blocking the only exit. What to do? Ami tells us to just step over him and not disturb his experience. As I gingerly step over Satish's prone, snoring body, I can't help but think how lucky he is. He's having the best experience of all.

* * *

Over lunch, Eva and Elsa are ecstatic about the session. "If everyone meditated for ten minutes a day, the world would be a better place," says Eva. She's very sensitive to world events. She stopped watching the news years ago. She takes it all too personally. She tells me she developed a cyst in her breast during the Iraq war, which is really more information than I need.

My alarm chimes at 6:00 a.m. Another day. Another experiment in caffeine withdrawal. My head is pounding, my *pranha* dangerously low. It's all I can do to drag myself to the morning yoga. I am one grumpy ashramite.

I feel a bit better after the yoga. Blood circulation has returned to my extremities. Our second *kriya* breathing experience is more exciting for me. Afterward, I feel extremely giddy in a way I haven't felt since I smoked that Moroccan hash (for research purposes) all those months ago. As we lie on the floor, palms up, in what's known as the *shavasana* or "dead man's pose," images flutter through my mind. I see Ami naked, and that's okay. I feel like I'm dying, and that's okay, too. I'm having an experience.

Another exercise. We're separated by gender and told to stare into a partner's eyes "with childlike innocence." My partner is a hairy middle-aged Indian beverage salesman. Staring into his eyes makes me extremely uncomfortable. Finally, the exercise is over, and we pair up again with a different partner. This time we are told to tell our life stories, and I realize I'd rather talk to someone for five hours than stare into their eyes (with childlike innocence) for five seconds.

Next, we're shown a short video about Guru-ji. We hear testimonials from a former terrorist, a prisoner, a tsunami victim, an HIV-positive person, all attesting to Guru-ji's powers and talking about how he and his Art of Living organization changed their lives. Sri Sri is portrayed as a multinational guru, a player on the world stage, who regularly addresses such august institutions as the American Psychiatric Association.

At the ashram, Guru-ji is spoken of often and always in reverential terms. Ami flutters her eyes and blushes like a schoolgirl in love whenever she mentions his name. Like all gurus, Sri Sri's early years are replete with tales of wonder. He was supposedly reading the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a Hindu holy text, at age four. When he started his ashram many years ago, the land was barren. But, explains Ami, "Guru-ji himself would get water from the well and he said, 'It is so lush and green and beautiful. Can't you see it?' And it happened. Everything, including this building, came to be just as he said it would. Guru-ji's grace is here, I assure you."

I have to be honest: All this guru worship turns me off. If I wanted to worship someone, there's always my wife. I didn't need to come to India. Fawning over someone else is just as counterproductive, and annoying, as fawning over yourself. Narcissism turned inside out is still narcissism.

I had had a chance to see Guru-ji in person. A few days before traveling to the ashram, I had been in Delhi, visiting friends, when I noticed a small ad announcing that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was giving a lecture, "Success without Stress." I couldn't miss this.

I arrive early, but there is already a long line. We are searched perfunctorily before entering a large auditorium. At the entrance is a wooden box where we can deposit questions for Guru-ji. I write down a question, fold the piece of paper, and drop it in the little slot.

One cannot listen to a guru on an empty stomach. I go to the snack bar to buy some popcorn and then take a seat up front. On the stage is a white sofa, draped in gold-colored fabric, with end tables on either side. Behind the sofa is a large sign. "Success without Stress," it says, "a talk by his holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar." Underneath are the logos of the fifteen corporate sponsors. Apparently, it requires a lot of cash to keep the guru machine humming along.

Guru-ji is late. The audience is starting to grow restless when suddenly the lights are dimmed and a small troupe, sitting on the floor, begins to chant. *Shiva om, Shiva om*. The pace quickens, and

the audience begins to clap rhythmically. *Shiva om, Shiva om.* A voice intones, "Before you came there was darkness, now there is light." *Shiva om, Shiva om.* Then Guru-ji enters, and the audience is hooting and hollering and standing, as if he were a rock star.

The overhead lighting illuminates Guru-ji like a ray of sunlight. He's wearing a flowing white robe. Wrapped around his neck is the biggest garland of flowers I've ever seen in my life. It must weigh fifty pounds. I'm surprised he can stand with that thing around his neck. Guru-ji lights the ceremonial lamp, as suited businessmen and dignitaries look on admiringly. Guru-ji is talking now. His lips are moving, but we can't hear him. A murmur of concern spreads through the audience. What is wrong with Guru-ji? How can we heed the wisdom if we can't hear the wisdom?

Guru-ji is fiddling with something on his robe. He taps it. Nothing. He taps again. Still nothing. More fidgeting. He taps again, and this time a low-pitched thumping sound fills the auditorium, followed by the high-pitched, wise voice of Guru-ji.

"The whole thing depends on a tiny little button," he says, with a knowing gleam in his eyes.

The audience laughs and applauds. When a guru says something like that, his words are imbued with deep significance, while if you or I said it people would just assume we're talking about a tiny little button and nothing more. Thus, just as some people are famous for being famous, gurus are wise for being wise. They can't go wrong.

Guru-ji tells us to greet the person next to us, and we do.

"Did you really greet them, or was it a formality?" he asks. "Were you like a flight attendant saying, 'Have a nice day'? You don't really mean it." A titter of laughter ripples through the crowd.

Guru-ji tell us that a baby smiles four hundred times a day. Adults only seventeen times. Married adults even less, he says, and the crowd breaks into laughter again.

"What is life with no smile, no laughter? A stressed person cannot smile."

Guru-ji moves from one end of the stage to another, including the entire audience in the event, like any good speaker. He tells us that we need to create a space for imperfection in our lives.

"Why do we lose our temper? Because we love perfection. Create a little room for imperfection in your life. Are you still with me?"

"Yes!" shouts the audience, in perfect unison.

The lights are dimmed, and we're told to massage our jaws and eyebrows. It feels good. Then, we're instructed to make the "*om*" sound. The word is Sanskrit, the language of the ancient Hindu texts. It is a language based on vibrations. In Sanskrit, you don't merely hear words, you feel them.

Hearing and feeling about one thousand people saying "*om*" at the same time is something to behold. The whole room feels as if it is vibrating. I like this, I think, yes, I like this, and it dawns on me how much I associate India with sounds—the singsong call of a street hawker, the bleating horn of an auto-rickshaw, the chanting of a Hindu priest. Every sound, not just the holy ones, is a vibration. And a vibration is, of course, motion. Air pressing against air. Nothing more. Yet this simple act of physics can result in Mozart's piano concerto or a freeway at rush hour or a lover's whisper or the pop-pop of a semiautomatic weapon.

It's question time. A woman pulls a small piece of paper out of the wooden box. The very first one is my question. I can hardly believe it. There must be dozens, if not hundreds, of questions in that box. What are the odds of her choosing mine? It must be a sign. In India, everything is a sign.

She reads it aloud. "Is happiness the highest ideal, or is there something greater we should be striving for?" This is a question that has been nagging me for a while now. Here I am traveling thousands of miles looking for the world's happiest places, assuming that happiness is, as Aristotle believed, the summum bonum: the greatest good. But is it? Or is there a more important destination?

Guru-ji doesn't hesitate. "Yes, there is something higher than happiness. Love is higher than happiness."

The audience applauds.

Guru-ji waits for them to settle down then elaborates: "Not only does love trump happiness, but in a competition between truth and love, love wins. We must strive for a love that does not bring distortions."

I'm not sure what he means by that last part. But there will be no follow-up questions here. We've already moved on to the next one: "What happens to us after we die?"

This is a big one, *the* big one, and everyone, including me, is on the edge of their seat.

Guru-ji pauses for dramatic effect before answering. "I could tell you," he says, "but I want you to have some suspense. I don't want you to get to the other side and say, 'Oh, this is what I expected. I am so bored.'"

The audience laughs. I feel cheated, though. I've covered enough news conferences to know when someone has artfully dodged a question.

Now people are shouting questions from the audience. Some of Guru-ji's answers are wise, some merely glib. A few are both.

"How can we stop terrorism?"

"Terrorism is simply a lack of humanism. Every child should learn a little about religion, then they won't think that others are bad."

"How can I know my fate?"

"Life is a combination of freedom and destiny, and the beauty is you don't know which is which."

"When will I get a billion rupees?"

"Ask some fortune-teller. But remember, he will charge you one hundred rupees."

"Expectation leads to disappointment, so what am I to do?"

"Are you expecting an answer from me? Better not to expect."

"When will India be corruption free?"

"When you stand up and fight against corruption."

I like that answer. It was real, and it required action of the asker. Hinduism is a religion of action more than belief. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Lord Krishna tells Arjun that his actions, not his beliefs, will

set him free. Or, as Guru-ji put it, "When you're in the bathtub, you need to move a little to feel the warmth."

More people are shouting, the questions are infinite, but Guru-ji holds up a hand and says, sorry, that's all the time he has tonight, and just like that he is gone.

People stand to leave. Everyone seems pleased with the evening's performance. I leave feeling like I've just had the spiritual equivalent of popcorn: tasty, easy to swallow, and certainly of some nutritional value, but not particularly filling.

I am unable to separate the message from the messenger. My antennae are on the lookout for even a whiff of hypocrisy and, once detected, negate any wisdom a guru might impart. Not everyone, though, thinks this way.

In the 1980s, a popular guru named Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, or Osho, attracted a huge following in India and then in the United States. He established an ashram in Oregon, an elaborate, sprawling complex. Osho preached the importance of love and mindfulness. It turns out, though, that Osho had lovingly purchased some ninety-three Rolls-Royces and was then arrested by the authorities on an immigration violation. I had read his teachings, and some of them seemed quite wise and sensible, but the Rolls-Royces were a real turnoff. I couldn't take Osho seriously.

That was not the case, though, with my Indian friend Manju. Manju, a very levelheaded attorney from Delhi, saw no reason to throw out Osho's wisdom with his Rolls-Royces. "I keep the good and discard the bad," she said to me over lunch one day. In other words, Indians don't expect perfection, or even consistency, from their gurus. The guru is wise. The guru is a fraud. Two contradictory thoughts that, for Manju, coexist comfortably in her Indian head.

It's my last day at the ashram. The course is over. I say goodbye to Ami. She beams at me and says, "There's a spiritual revolution

coming, maybe not in our lifetime, but it's coming." I say something lame like, "I sure hope so," and then I leave.

I envy people like Ami. Her mind is clear, uncluttered. Her *pranba* is high. Her face glows. I wish I could be like her. What is preventing me? Am I so attached to irony and cleverness? To success? A year of traveling and thinking about happiness has proved fairly conclusively that none of these things leads to happiness, and yet I still can't let them go.

I say goodbye to Eva and Elsa, who are ecstatic about their new guru. They're already making plans to attend the advanced course. Eva gives me a big hug. She says I look different—calmer, and with more energy. I cringe at the mention of that word, but she is right. I do feel more relaxed. I breathe more deeply. I survived three days without coffee, and in fact my headaches have nearly disappeared. The circulation has returned to my legs.

Where did this come from? I can't identify any one moment nor any particular position I twisted my body into. It just snuck up on me. Maybe this is how enlightenment happens. Not with a thunderclap or a bolt of lightning but as a steady drip, drip, drip until one day you realize your bucket is full.

The problem with an Indian ashram is that once you leave it, you're back in India. My taxi is stuck in traffic. My throat burns from the exhaust. My eyes sting. The roads seem even more chaotic than they did just a few days ago, or maybe my mind, serene and caffeine free, is more attuned to the heat and dust and noise. I've always been especially sensitive to noise, a proven detriment to happiness, what essayist Ambrose Bierce called "a stench in the ear."

Finally, we arrive at a plain-looking two-story building in a bustling part of town. One Shanti Road. It's owned by an artist named Suresh. I had heard that he rents out spare rooms and that his house is a sort of revolving salon. Everyone passes through 1 Shanti Road. It seemed like a good way to recover, if that's the

right word, from my ashram experience and get to know Bangalore at the same time.

Suresh designed 1 Shanti Road himself. He built the house around a large badam tree. He loves that tree so much that his friends joke that he's married to it.

I stumble up a circular staircase with my bags. The living room at 1 Shanti Road is chockablock with paintings and books and Hindu bric-a-brac. Dishes are piled high in the kitchen sink. Flies hover over the mango rinds and coffee grounds like a fleet of attack helicopters. "The maid didn't show up today," explains Suresh. Everyone in India has a maid, even struggling artists.

It's still early in the morning, but Suresh's salon is already hopping. People are sitting around, lounging, smoking cigarettes, and drinking copious amounts of coffee, deflating their *pranba* to dangerously low levels and not giving a damn. The air is thick with smoke and irony. I inhale deeply.

"Welcome to the anti-ashram," someone says. I'm introduced to Harsha, whose name means "happiness," and Vikram and Arjun and others whose names I can't keep straight.

I've walked into the middle of an Indian bitch session. They're complaining about Bangalore's exponential growth and what it's doing to their beloved city. My arrival, fresh from the ashram, has diverted the conversation from traffic jams to spirituality. It's a sharp turn, but one this group handles with ease.

"This is a country based on the God syndrome," says Vikram, or Viki, as his friends call him. He has a gold earring in one ear and is wearing a saffron shirt and is openly gay in a country that is not so open about such things. "People need crutches," says Viki, "and the gurus are crutches."

I feel compelled to defend the gurus, mine in particular, an impulse that surprises me. I tell them about the breathing technique I learned and my latent relaxation that resulted.

"Someone develops a breathing technique and then you want all the answers from him," says a beefy sculptor named Vivek. "You're increasing the oxygen flow to the brain. You get a high

from that," says Roy, who is a doctor and should know. Roy treats many patients, but he's never met one of them. He reads X rays for a hospital in the United States.

Okay, so there is a medical explanation for that giddiness I experienced. Does that make it less real?

"It's a spiritual pedicure," chimes someone else. "You feel better for a while, but nothing has really changed."

"Holy people must renounce," says Viki. "Ultimately, it's about denial and renunciation."

I relay to this group of skeptics how Guru-ji accurately forecasted a lush green ashram, when the ground was rocky and barren and the experts said nothing could grow there.

Classic guru mythology, says someone. They always announce they will build something or grow something even though the experts say it can't be done. These revelations are always in retrospect, though. They are articles of faith, there's no record of them, so they can't be proved or disproved.

"Why can't people just sit and meditate quietly?" says someone else.

"It's too boring," says Viki.

"Can you be genuine and a fraud at the same time?" I ask.

"Apparently, you can," says Suresh. "This is India."

"Everything in India is true, and its opposite is true also," someone else says.

My head is spinning. It feels like it's going to explode. Suresh, sensing my unease, offers me coffee, but I demure. Decaf me has survived three days already. I want to see how much longer I can last.

The conversation ricochets from the petty to the profound and back again. I'm getting spiritual whiplash. The subject of *samsara* comes up. That's the eastern belief that we are born over and over again, until we achieve enlightenment. Then we are liberated and do not return to this earth.

"Personally, I don't mind coming back as a dog or a tree," says Viki. "I'm in no hurry to get off this planet."

"Somewhere in the universe, someone has been given a speck of time. We are that person, it is our speck of time," says Suresh, enigmatically.

Viki's brief burst of optimism has dissipated, and he's griping again. "Do you know what the best business in this country is? Religion. I'm very cynical," says Viki, as if there were any doubt. "If I have a problem I go to see my best friend, not a guru. They are making a mint, these gurus. I don't think there is any such thing as a real *sadhu*. They're all fake."

Someone stands to leave. Someone else enters. In India, a man's home is his castle. It is a porous castle, though, with no moat, and it is prone to invasion by friend and foe alike. At my apartment in Delhi, a perpetual parade of humanity passed: plumbers, electricians, delivery boys, holy men, government clerks, taxi drivers. It can be awfully annoying; sometimes you just want to putter about in your underwear, unmolested. This endlessly flowing river of humanity, though, also means that you are never alone in India.

At 1 Shanti Road, the conversation meanders like the Ganges, sloshing from one subject to another with no discernible pattern. One recurring theme, though, is the change taking place in Bangalore.

"We've become like owls," says Viki. "People stay up all night, working or partying. Why is everybody running around in such a hurry? And the traffic is crazy."

Don't forget the mobile phones, someone says.

"Everyone has one," says Viki, in the same tone of voice he might use for "Everyone has tuberculosis."

"Do you have one, Viki?" I ask.

"Yes, I do," he says, sheepishly, producing a shiny new model from his pocket. "But I growl and snarl at it. I have the right attitude." He makes a snarling expression with his face.

"These people, the cybercoolies, will burn out by thirty, thirty-five," someone says. "They will wake up one day and realize that life has passed them by."

I'm trying to figure out if these are valid concerns or merely sour grapes, when Emma arrives.

She bounds up the stairs carrying two huge suitcases. The flight from London was a nightmare. She's been traveling for twenty-four hours. No, she doesn't need sleep, she needs a ciggie and coffee, stat, and Suresh promptly produces both.

Emma is a hedonic refugee of the first order. When she was five years old, growing up in London, she would tug at women's saris in restaurants. One of the first words she ever spoke was "India."

She finally traveled to India at age twenty-five. She flew into Delhi and hopped into a cab, plunging into the craziness that is an Indian street. Most people find this disconcerting, terrifying, but not Emma. She sat in the backseat of that cab and felt a deep sense of calm wash over her. Maybe she cried, maybe not. She can't remember. One thing she knew for certain, though: She was home.

Properly caffeinated and nicotined, Emma plops down on a chair and joins the conversation. "What do you love so much about India?" I ask.

"I love the sound of horns tooting, the rickshaws, the women balancing pots on their head, the peanut *wallah* calling out, the bells at the temples. I love the Indian accent. It's endless, really. I love everything."

I can't help but notice that most of the things she listed are aural. India is a feast for the ears. Maybe that will change, as India grows richer because, to be honest, there is nothing more deadly dull than the sound of prosperity. The dull hum of an air conditioner or the muffled clicks on a keyboard simply can't compete with the melodic calls of hawkers at an open-air market or the rhythmic clickity-clack of a sweatshop's sewing machines. Even Third World traffic, with its symphony of honking horns and tinkling bells, beats the monotonous whoosh of a modern freeway.

Emma used to live in Bangalore. That's how she knows Suresh and the gang. Now she's back in London but still returns to India often. A round of Indian geography ensues. They talk of people

they know, connections, degrees of separation. A billion souls in India, and the residents of 1 Shanti Road seem to know them all. This country is a chain of infinitely intersecting circles.

Emma opens her suitcases, and I can hardly believe my eyes. Inside are dozens and dozens of bags, each one neatly wrapped in plastic. Emma is in the bag business. She designs them at her studio in London and has them made in Hong Kong and here in Bangalore. I tell her about my bag addiction, and her eyes light up. It is the look of a crack dealer who has just been introduced to a hard-core user.

I ask Emma to analyze my bag addiction. As you recall, I own more bags than most people, including most mental-health professionals, would consider normal. "Hmmm," she says, like a psychoanalyst who's been presented with a particularly challenging case. "It's a safety thing, a security blanket. Plus, you carry things in bags, baggage. So your obsession represents an extension of your emotional baggage. That's it: You need some place to put your emotional baggage."

Not bad, not bad at all.

I'm introduced to Chandra, a roly-poly guy who lives in the apartment downstairs. His bald head is large and bulbous, and he's wearing a green *kurta*, which hangs down to his knees. He reminds me of a friendly Martian. In fact, Chandra is a cultural geographer, which is a perfect thing to be, as far as I'm concerned. He lived in the United States for eighteen years, in places like Waco, Texas, and Fargo, North Dakota. To this day, mere mention of the word "Fargo" is enough to make him shiver. He's also developed an affinity for *Seinfeld* reruns and an unnerving feeling every morning that he needs to be somewhere, anywhere, by 8:30 a.m. "And it's only in the past year that I could take an afternoon nap and not feel guilty," he adds.

I need a break from the conversation, so I step out onto the terrace. Someone once told me that if you want to know India, just stand on a street corner, any street corner, and spin around 360 degrees. You will see it all. The best and worst of humanity. The

ridiculous and the sublime. The profane and the profound. Here at 1 Shanti Road you don't even need to spin around. From the terrace, I can see it all. In one direction is a shantytown. A jumble of tin-roofed shacks that, at first glance, looks like a garbage dump. Only when you look more closely do you realize that people live there. Look in another direction and you see a shiny glass building, an office for Cisco Systems.

As I said, in India everything is a sign, especially the signs. Like the one across the street for a company called Sublime Solutions. I have no idea what the company does, probably some sort of software work, but I love the name.

I step back inside and rejoin the conversation, midstream.

"It's all true. And all false," someone is saying, and everyone concurs.

Emma is on her fifth cup of coffee and seventh cigarette. Her eyes have grown big, and she is talking very fast now. Suddenly, the lights go out, and the ceiling fans glide to a halt. I start to sweat almost instantly. No one misses a beat, though.

"Bangalore is the capital of power outages," someone says.

"What about the high-tech companies?" I ask. "How do they do business with all of these power cuts?"

"Oh, come on," says Viki, as if I were terribly naïve, which of course I am. "They have supergenerators, triple redundancy. They're on a separate grid, their own grid."

"The entire IT world is on a separate grid," says Chandra, and he's clearly not talking only about electricity. The high-tech workers, those who have made it big, live in gated communities with names like Dollar Colony. They shop in malls, which also have their own generators. They worship Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

Every old building in Bangalore that is torn down is replaced with an office park or a shopping complex. When the term "shopping complex" is translated into the local language, it emerges as, literally, "shopping complicated."

"Yes," says Chandra. "It certainly can be."

I ask Emma for her happiness number.

"I'm a five, not a four. I think, maybe a 3.5."

She's dropping rapidly the more she thinks about it, which, as any Thai will tell you, is precisely her problem.

"I should be happier, but fear has wormed its way inside of me, and my confidence is gone. When I was a painter, when I was younger and had nothing, I was happy."

Researchers have found that happiness forms a U-shaped curve over the course of a lifetime. We're happiest in youth and old age. Emma is at the bottom of the curve, an emotional trough. I don't have the heart to tell her this, though. I fear it might push her happiness score even lower.

Emma tells me that the energy is better here than it is in London. There's that word again, but this time I don't cringe. Spoken here, by a chain-smoking bag-making hedonic refugee, it somehow rings true.

My life at 1 Shanti Road falls into a pleasant routine. I wake up every morning before dawn, a bad habit I picked up at the ashram, and do the *kriya* breathing exercise. Okay, so it's just a hit of oxygen and nothing transcendental. I don't care. It makes me feel good. It gives me energy. (God, now I'm using that word.) And since I'm off coffee, I can use all the energy I can get.

Afterward, I step onto the terrace and watch the sun rise over the shantytown next door. The poor live their lives more publicly than the rest of us. A child is squatting, defecating, a woman is giving a man a bath, pouring buckets of water over his head. Another man has a splinter or something stuck in his foot; a small crowd has gathered around him, discussing, I imagine, the best way to remove it. Another man is brushing his teeth. Most of these people have jobs, earning about three dollars a day. They are not at the bottom of the ladder in India, far from it. And that is the

beauty of life in India—no matter how low your rung, there is always someone beneath you. An infinite ladder.

Next, Suresh and I drive on his motorcycle to one of Bangalore's parks—Bangalore was known as the Garden City before it was the IT City—and we go for a walk. It's still early, but the park is crowded with people walking, meditating, defecating, doing yoga, laughing. On the way back, we stop to pick up some *idlis* and other spongy items that pass for breakfast in southern India.

The rest of my day unfolds lazily. I sit around reading and thinking about coffee. Mostly, though, I just sit. Indians, and Indian men in particular, are great sitters. World-class. I can't compete with them, but I do my best.

At some point, Chandra, the friendly Martian, will suggest we go to Khoshy's, a coffee shop, and continue our sitting there. Khoshy's is a Bangalore institution. It's been around since 1940, seven years before India gained its independence from Britain.

It's hardly changed since. The walls are mustard yellow and in desperate need of a paint job. Ceiling fans spin but not too quickly. Nothing moves too quickly at Khoshy's. Not the waiters or the chefs or the customers, and that is precisely its appeal. People spend hours and hours here, meeting friends, sipping the ginger punch, and eating Khoshy's signature "smileys," fried potatoes cooked in the shape of smiley faces.

On this day, we're meeting Chandra's friend, Meena. She writes a column for a national newspaper. She has short, grayish hair and a fierce wit.

"Don't get me wrong," Meena says, head tilted at a slight angle. "Gurus have their uses. They're just not for me."

I never thought of it that way before. Gurus have their uses.

Meena once spent six months in the United States, working for the *Baltimore Sun*. She couldn't wait to leave. There's too much distance between people in the United States, and by that she means more than physical distance, though that, too. She found the streets eerily quiet. Where are all the people? she wondered.

"Americans are so busy," she says. "If they're not busy working, they're busy relaxing."

I order a fresh lime soda. Meena does, too, plus the peanut masala, no chili.

"What can Americans learn from India?" I ask Meena.

"You could learn to relax, to live overlapping lives. We are an ad-hoc country. We accept a lot of imperfections. You could be more like that."

If anything, though, India is aping America. Shopping malls, gated communities, fast food. They're all here now. Meena doesn't care for India Shining. She prefers India dull, which was never all that dull, actually.

"The Indian middle class is distancing itself from poverty, and that is dangerous," she says. "The old path you took to God was through suffering and renunciation, the way of the *sanyasi*. That doesn't appeal to the young crowd. Everyone is into the insta-guru now."

Chandra agrees. "There is no sacrifice required with these new gurus."

Chandra offers me a ride back to 1 Shanti Road on his scooter. We are two men of not insignificant heft, and the underpowered scooter wobbles precariously. The traffic is so close I can feel the hot exhaust from the cars on my shins. I had witnessed an accident some days ago and now I see signs of impending danger everywhere. An ambulance passes, sirens blaring, and I realize this is the first time I've ever seen an ambulance in India. Now, we're passing a sign for "Brain and Spine Care." Oh, God, I think, another sign. We're going to crash. But a few minutes later Chandra pulls up to 1 Shanti Road. We're fine.

That evening, I step onto the terrace. The air is soft and cool. I look at the shantytown—it's impossible to avoid—and I see a few kids picking through a pile of trash, looking for something they can sell for a few rupees. A few years in India hardens you to such sights. But there's always something that pierces your armor, no matter how thick it may have grown.

I see a girl, she can't be more than four years old, picking through the trash with one hand and holding something in her other hand. What is it? I squint and see that it is a stuffed animal, a dirty but otherwise intact little bear. My armor dissolves. This is not happy India. This is the country where, as Mark Twain observed, every life is sacred, except human life. Indians may care deeply about their families and circle of friends, but they don't even notice anyone outside that circle. That's why Indian homes are spotless, while just a few feet outside the front door the trash is piled high. It's outside the circle.

Emma has just returned from a visit to her factory. On the floor, she has spread piles of bags. They are everywhere, and they are beautiful. I'm tempted to get naked and roll around in the pile but restrain myself. This is a forgiving place, but even the inhabitants of 1 Shanti Road have their limits.

I walk into the kitchen and notice that the sink is now spotless, the flies have retreated. Suresh's maid, Mona, must be back.

I hear Mona before I see her. The bangles she wears on her wrists and ankles jangle musically. I had heard that Mona was extremely happy, even though she is dirt-poor and lives in one of the shantytowns I see from the terrace. Mona knows only one word of English—“super”—so I ask Suresh to translate.

“Mona, are you happy?”

“Yes, happy.”

“And what is the key to happiness?”

“You should not think too much. You should not have anything in your mind. The more you think, the less happy you will be. Live happily, eat happily, die happily.” And with that she flings her arms into the air with a flourish. Mona and the Thais would get along beautifully.

“But Mona, don't you have problems? Don't you have money issues?”

She flings her arms again, this time much more forcefully,

indicating that I'm thinking too much. Talking too much, too. The conversation is over. She has work to do. She walks away, her bangles jangling in the soft evening air.

I'm not sure what to make of Mona. I'm well aware of the dangerous myth of the happy, noble savage. They have so little but are so happy. Statistically, that's not true. The poorest countries in the world are also the least happy, and that is certainly true of India. It ranks in the lower end of Ruut Veenhoven's happiness spectrum.

But Mona is not a statistic. She is a person and, she claims, a very happy one. Who am I to disagree? Poverty doesn't guarantee happiness, nor does it deny it.

A few years ago, happiness researcher Robert Biswas-Diener interviewed hundreds of street people in Calcutta, the poorest of the poor, and recorded their happiness levels (again, based on self-reports). Then he did the same with a few hundred homeless people in Fremont, California.

Calcutta's destitute, it turns out, are significantly happier than those in California, even though the Californian homeless had better access to food, shelter, and health services. Biswas-Diener attributed the surprising result to the fact that Calcutta's street people may have little in the way of material wealth, but they do have strong social ties. Family. Friends. I would go a step further and say that no one is really homeless in India. Houseless perhaps, but not homeless.

There's another reason, I think, why Calcutta's poor are happier than America's. If an Indian person is poor, it is because of fate, the gods, or some negative karma accumulated in a previous lifetime. In other words, they are not to blame. If an American is poor, it is seen as a personal failure, a flawed character.

One day, I find myself alone at 1 Shanti Road, a rare occurrence. I'm lounging on the daybed, reading a book, and listening to Hindi pop on the radio when I hear Mona's distinctive jangle. She's balancing a bucket of laundry gracefully on one shoulder. And then

we have a conversation, even though we don't share a common language. Not since my pantomimes with Luba in Moldova have I experienced such a thing.

Mona "asks" if I would like some tea. I decline, but she persists. You really should have some tea. Should I turn on the ceiling fan? It's a good idea. It's hot. Maybe that's too high a speed; I'll turn it down. Mona indicates—in her clairvoyant way—that it's best not to do two things at once. She turns off the radio. A few minutes later, she tells me my tea is getting cold, and I really should drink it. She conveys all of this with musical flings of her arms. I decide that, statistics be damned, Mona is happy. Wise, too.

Diwali has arrived. Traditionally, it's known as the Festival of Light, but these days it's the Festival of Loud and Obnoxious Firecrackers. Every street is converted into a free-fire zone. The dogs are traumatized, as am I. For three solid days, my ears are filled with this awful stench. Pop. Boom. And the smoke! It wafts over the city, which now feels like one giant war zone.

On the terrace, Suresh and Emma are preparing for the holiday. Emma is making a Diwali bowl: candles and flowers floating in a pool of water. We light a few sparklers. Mine won't stay lit. Suresh tells me his favorite Hindu god is Shiva, the destroyer, "because you must destroy in order to create."

Emma says she never feels impending doom in India, even though that would be a perfectly rational thing to feel.

"But back in Britain I'm often scared to death."

Suresh puts together a package of cookies for the neighborhood kids and Mona delivers it in a shopping bag. We're sitting under the aging badam tree, which hangs over the terrace like a ceiling.

"Suresh, don't you ever get tired of all these people coming and going constantly? Don't you want to be alone sometimes?"

"No, even when people are around I can be alone. It's a technique that I've mastered."

* * *

My flight leaves soon. I have time for one more trip to Khoshy's, where I've become a regular. I've arranged to meet a professor named Sundar Sarukkai. He wrote an article about happiness that caught my eye. In one short paragraph he managed to capture a paradox that has been nagging me for some time: "Desire is the root cause of sorrow but desire is also the root cause of action. How do we counter the paralysis of action when there is no desire to motivate us?"

Exactly. Hinduism—indeed, most eastern religions—tells us that striving, even striving for happiness, is self-defeating. The moment you try to improve yourself, you've failed. Game over. Yet just lie there like a zombie and you lose, too. What to do?

Sundar seems like he might have some answers. He has advanced degrees in both philosophy and physics. He has shoulder-length hair and, it turns out, is related to Guru-ji.

We grab seats in the corner. I like him immediately. He has Guru-ji's twinkly eyes but not his overt godliness. I'm eager to talk about ambition, the one noun that, more than anything else, has sabotaged my search for happiness. It is the source of my success and my misery. A contradiction that, I figure, only an Indian can wrap his mind around.

"Everyone is ambitious. It's human nature. The question is, what price are we willing to pay for the ambition? Not just an economic price, but a social price." And, he says, the average American is willing to pay a higher price than the average Indian.

"But don't Indians want to succeed?"

"Yes, of course we do, but we deal with disappointment differently. Our attitude is, 'Okay, you've done your best, now let the universe decide.'"

"What do you mean?"

"What some people call chance, we call God. But let's call it unpredictability. You do the same thing ten times, and it doesn't

work. On the eleventh time, it works. The entire universe is chance and probability. So we accept everything.”

There it is again: that Hindu belief that all of life is *maya*, illusion. Once we see life as a game, no more consequential than a game of chess, then the world seems a lot lighter, a lot happier. Personal failure becomes “as small a cause for concern as playing the role of loser in a summer theater performance,” writes Huston Smith in his book *The World's Religions*. If it's all theater, it doesn't matter which role you play, as long as you realize it's only a role. Or, as Alan Watts said: “A genuine person is one who knows he is a big act and does it with complete zip.”

We sit there at Khoshy's and talk for a good hour or two. There is no rush, no agenda. It's unpredictable, but in a good way. Time feels expansive. This, I realize, is what I love about India. The hidden little gems amid the grubbiness and the squalor and the greed. I am, dare I say, happy.

“One Shanti Road is the happiest place in India,” Emma had said shortly after she arrived. At the time, I didn't know what she was talking about. Now I do. “Shanti,” it turns out, is a Sanskrit word that means “inner peace.” Maybe 1 Shanti Road isn't the anti-ashram after all. Maybe it's just another kind of ashram.

My flight leaves in a few hours. Bangalore is anything but peaceful. Diwali is in full swing. Firecrackers are going off everywhere. The air is thick with acrid smoke. Suresh hurries me out a side exit to a waiting cab. I feel like I'm boarding the last helicopter out of Saigon. I give him a hug and tell him to be happy. Then the taxi pulls away, and 1 Shanti Road disappears in a cloud of smoke.

I am relieved to be leaving this craziness behind. I want to stay. A contradiction? Yes, but one I can live with and even learn to enjoy.

Chapter 10

AMERICA

Happiness Is Home

Dockominium. The word hung in the air like a perfectly ripe mango. I didn't know what it meant, but it sounded big and juicy, and I couldn't wait to dive in.

The word was uttered by my friend Craig Baggott. Craig was a big, ungainly man with a shaggy flop of grayish hair and eyes that twinkled mischievously when he said things like “dockominium.” Which Craig did often.

Craig could make magic with a ribbon of toilet paper, twirling it gracefully in a maneuver he dubbed “the toilet-paper dance.” Craig loved cars and Mountain Dew—two passions he often combined in spur-of-the-moment cross-country road trips. He would just grab one of his kids, a few gallons of Dew and hit the road. Craig didn't stop for bathroom breaks. I don't think it was a macho thing but, rather, that Craig, not a conventionally religious man, found some sort of transcendent peace on the open road and didn't want to interrupt it.

Craig was more at ease, more comfortable in his own skin, than anyone I've known. All of the energy that most of us expend worrying about our careers and our marriage and our nasal hair, Craig channeled into just being Craig. This was, I'm sure, a far more efficient and noble use of the energy we call life.

So when Craig uttered the word “dockominium,” I paid attention. As you might have guessed by now, a dockominium is a combination of a dock and a condominium. I do not especially care for