

yoga

JOURNAL

CREATE
HAPPINESS
EVERY DAY

Live Boldly

HOW TO FACE
LIFE'S CHALLENGES
FEARLESSLY

Practice Yoga Forever

DON'T LET AGE, ILLNESS,
OR INJURY STOP YOU

Couples' Yoga

FALL IN LOVE ALL OVER AGAIN

Pain-free Backbends

Overwhelmed?

9 STEPS TO GETTING
YOUR LIFE BACK

Plus

SAFER SUNSCREENS
HEALTHIER SUMMER GRILLING
EUROPE'S NEW YOGA CAPITAL



HEALTH FITNESS FOOD TRAVEL HOME WORK NATURE RELATIONSHIPS SPIRITUALITY VALUES

AUGUST 2005

YOGAJOURNAL.COM

\$4.99US \$6.99CAN



0 74851 08846 3

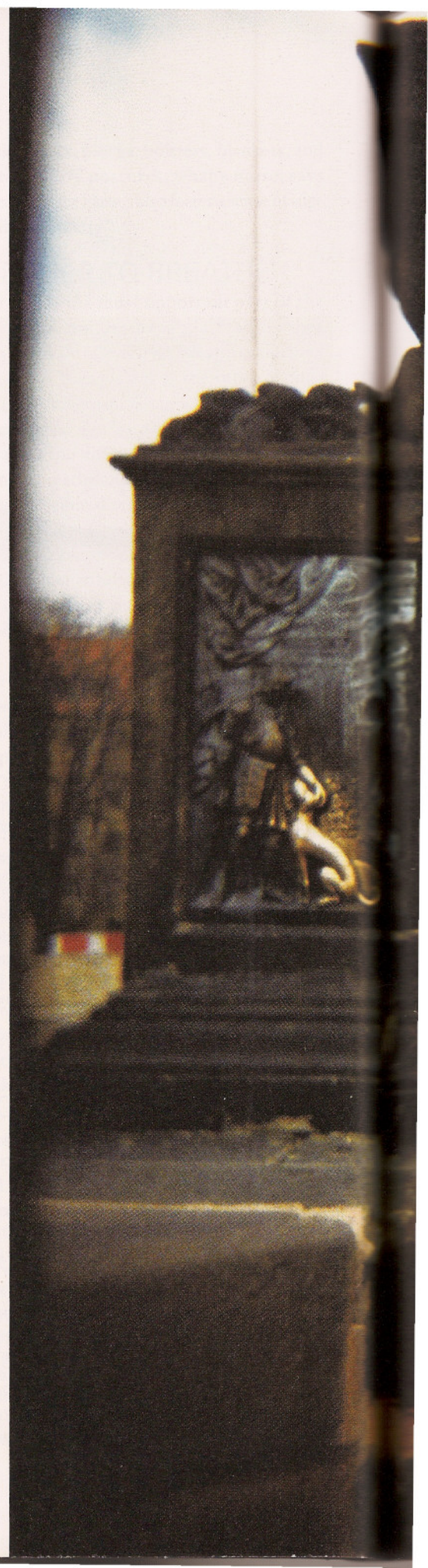
too loud a Solitude

I NAGGED BY LONELINESS, A VISITOR DISCOVERS
A WORLD OF CONNECTION IN ONE OF ATHEIST
PRAGUE'S BUDDING SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES.

I'm sitting in a pub outside Prague, the only foreigner in a packed house. I can barely see my friends for the smoke, hardly hear them for the noise, as our harried waitress slams another round of *velké pivo* (large beers) on the table. But that doesn't matter—they're all speaking Czech and I've run out of things I know how to say. I feel my foreignness acutely. ✂ It's the end of a long day of kayaking with my Shambhala Buddhist group. After early-morning chanting of the Heart Sutra in Czech, we had donned wetsuits and headed for the river. My rowing partner Ilona and I overturned three times in white water, laughing when we lost our paddles, bonding despite having few words in common. The kayaking was exhilarating, but now, unable to connect so easily,

By *Kristin Barendsen*

PHOTOGRAPHED ON THE CHARLES BRIDGE BY PETRA RŮŽIČKOVÁ





I feel awkward and invisible. In my gut is the hollow ache of loneliness; even the sublime Czech beer tastes like copper in my mouth.

Soon, Ilona pulls up a chair next to me and we try once more. She tells me about her family and asks about my travels. My loneliness quickly dissolves, giving way to a rush of gratitude. I find myself loving this moment—with its bad goulash and its smoke—as something precious and unique.

In my life abroad, small things make me swing from loneliness to elated connection, from aching pain to delight. In fact, everything feels more intense. I take more risks, like kayaking in rapids with strangers and stammering in bad Czech—but I also pay more attention to the details of an everyday life that is unfailingly rich and bizarre. There is no doubt that living here, and continuing my practice of yoga and Buddhism in Prague, have helped me appreciate more fully all that arises in each moment—an awareness I hope to deepen no matter where I end up next.

ILLUSIONS OF LONELINESS

FOR YEARS PRAGUE had been stuck in my heart. I had never seen a single photograph, but reports of its beauty and mystery were enough to draw me. As it turned out, Prague is even more beautiful, and more melancholy, than I had thought possible. Rich in history and alive with change, the city is artistic, surreal, and fascinating.

I came to Prague seeking transformation. I knew from having lived and traveled in Asia that each new place opens me to new ways of thinking and experiencing the world. What I didn't anticipate was how much Prague itself would be about transformation. Since the Czechs threw off communism by peaceful revolution in 1989, Prague has grown from a city of long lines and downtrodden spirits to one of fresh ideas and real opportunities. Last year, the Czech Republic joined the European Union, setting off a flurry of activity in an attempt to meet the standards of Western neighbors. And yet there is a certain tension; while many Czechs have embraced capitalism wholeheartedly, others are nostalgic about the cheap flats and guaranteed paychecks they had during the old regime.

In the autumn of 2003, knowing not a soul, I found a flat in a Renaissance building near the center, an American student to share it with, and work freelancing for Prague's English-language newspaper. Right away I connected with

a thriving Ashtanga yoga scene, dining with fellow yogis after class and participating in weekend retreats. My days quickly filled with colorful activity, yet I felt something welling up inside.

Loneliness is a feeling every foreigner knows. You stand out in sharp relief against the dominant culture and you never really fit in. You often struggle to be understood, not just in another language, but also within the context of a different culture. Your new friends can't really know who you are, and it's often exhausting and emotionally unsatisfying to spell it out. The ache of disconnection can be deep and can trick you into thinking there's something wrong with you—that you need others, and you need them now, to be whole.

Of course, all that time spent alone can also be an opportunity to explore the nature of solitude. In my yoga and meditation practice, solitude feels entirely different from loneliness—it's a source of strength and connection to spirit. But that ability to appreciate being alone, rather than be carried away by loneliness, is easier to access on the mat or the cushion than in the outside world.

Still, loneliness can motivate me to be more outgoing, to ask strangers for advice as a doorway to conversation. Those strangers often open up quickly, taking more risks with me because they figure I won't be here forever. Together we pour out our souls late into the night, sure we'll never forget each other and our moment together. In this way, loneliness transforms into connection. And these connections in turn dissolve the illusion of loneliness and expand my experience of being.

DHARMA BUMS

ALTHOUGH I'D NEVER been much of a group person, I quickly embraced Prague's yoga and Buddhist communities. Besides my Shambhala group, I practice with the "Ashtangis," a local yoga scene centered around two teachers who studied together in Mysore, India. Partly due to the energy of a very social Austrian teacher, Georg Wöginger, who hosts music jams and dinner parties with games, this group is tighter than any yoga community I've known. Being part of an underground subculture may also spur connections: Since Eastern practices are far from mainstream here, Czech yogis, meditators, and Buddhist practitioners



UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS *Prague makes a fitting backdrop for an exploration of loneliness.*



are virtually foreigners within their own culture, and they seem to form tighter friendships as a result.

During Prague's four decades of communism, religious practice was forbidden, and the city's few yogis and meditators kept a low profile. Many practiced in secret; some were interrogated by the secret police. After the regime fell, Christianity didn't make a big comeback, and today, Prague's stunning cathedrals are filled mainly with tourists. Fewer than 10 percent of Czechs are practicing Catholics or Protestants, according to the Jesuit priest and academic Josef Blaha, and most of the rest are atheist, making the Czech Republic the most atheist country in Europe.

"Buddhism is flourishing now because it was forbidden before," says Jitka Holubcová, codirector of Prague's Shambhala Buddhist Center. "People are attracted to the principles of openness and goodness, since in the old days they couldn't apply them," she says. "The community is growing quickly."

In 2004 two new yoga studios and two meditation centers opened in central Prague. Among practitioners there is a palpable energy of enthusiasm, a collective "beginner's mind." And yet, the spiritual scene here is markedly smaller than that of most Western European capitals. The community has no senior Buddhist teachers, which is unfortunate in one sense: Students often express the desire for more guidance. However, this is also an opportunity. We are all peers discovering the path together, trying to show up as teachers for each other. With our own tools, sweat, and funds, Shambhala members turned an old Greek-language school into a lovely center.

"We're still finding our way, figuring out how to make this work on our own," Holubcová says. She also acknowledges that our Shambhala group is "more flexible" than most Western Buddhist communities. When our group goes kayaking in the Czech countryside, we begin with shots of rum at 10 a.m.—it's a matter of survival in the frigid water. Romantic pairings arise and fall away, and no one looks askance. Call it nondualism or breaking the rules, none of this would happen in my California *sangha*. But this is where Czech culture and the dharma meet, blur edges, influence each other. Buddhism in Prague is something ancient in the process of transformation, just like Prague itself.

Czech Buddhists and yogis underscore the primary teaching of life abroad: Be flexible. In Prague you'd better make friends with secondhand smoke; you'll eat beef by accident anyway, so you might as well try traditional dishes on purpose.

continued on page 112

PRACTICE IN PRAGUE

There is a surprising variety of yoga classes taught in this elegant metropolis. And there's a growing spiritual scene as well. Here are some places to check out. Remember that even when a class is taught in Czech, the teacher may be able to guide you in English.

YOGA CLASSES

YOGA IN DAILY LIFE This raja practice, which focuses more on purifying body and spirit than on challenging poses, has a huge following in Central Europe. Imported during the 1970s by Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda, the classes include asana, pranayama, and relaxation. 60 classes per week; 1 in English BLANICKÁ 17, PRAGUE 2, +420.224.253.702 WWW.JOGA.CZ

VINYASA ASHTANGA YOGA Beginners, Primary Series, and Mysore classes are available, and the pace is slower than at most studios in the United States. 12 classes per week, in English, Czech, and German KARMELITSKÁ 13, PRAGUE 1 AND LOTUS BUDDHIST CENTER, DLOUHÁ 2, PRAGUE 1, +420.606.560.000 WWW.ASHTANGAYOGA.CZ

HATHA YOGA WITH ARUNA SINGHVI An India-born doctor and popular hatha teacher, Singhvi recently opened a spacious studio near the center that attracts an expatriate clientele. 8 to 12 classes per week, all in English SOUKENICKÁ 7, PRAGUE 1, +420.222.318.230 ARUNA.SINGHVI@WORLDONLINE.CZ

FIT JOGA Iyengar Yoga, Integral Yoga, Power Yoga, hatha yoga; 11 classes per week, in Czech; call before dropping in. Private lessons in English available NEPILOVA 1, PRAGUE 9, +420.605.253.475 WWW.FITJOGA.CZ

LOTUS CENTER Ashtanga, vinyasa flow, hatha, and Integral Yoga; 10 classes per week, 1 in English, but other teachers speak English DLOUHÁ 2, PRAGUE 1, +420.224.814.734 WWW.CENTRUMLOTUS.CZ

YOGA HOUSE IN HLAVICE Yoga retreat center just outside Prague HLAVICE 15, +420.485.148.900 WWW.JOGA-HLAVICE.CZ

BUDDHIST CENTERS

WWW.BUDDHISMUS.CZ

Portal for Buddhist happenings in Prague

SHAMBHALA Twice-weekly sittings, full moon chanting, guest teachers, workshops VARŠAVSKÁ 13, PRAGUE 2, PRAHA@SHAMBHALA.CZ WWW.SHAMBHALA.CZ

LOTUS CENTER Dzogchen, dharma study, Buddha Mangala, Karma Dargje Ling DLOUHÁ 2, PRAGUE 1, +420.224.814.734, WWW.CENTRUMLOTUS.CZ

DIAMOND WAY BUDDHIST CENTER PRAGUE Some meetings in English; weekly lectures, daily meditations HRADEŠINSKÁ 52, PRAGUE 10, +420.602.506.303 WWW.BUDDHISMUS-DIAMANTOVACESTA.CZ/CENTRUM/PRAHA/

SAMADHI BUDDHIST MEDITATION CENTER

Tupadly, a village near Prague. First retreat projected for fall 2005 BHANTE@BHANTEWIMALA.COM WWW.BHANTEWIMALA.COM/HTML/SAMADHI.HTML



PRAGUE GNOSIS *Treasuring moments at the Lotus Center (above) and in the Old Town Square (below)*



continued from page 77

During a Czech dharma talk, I might only understand every tenth word, so I have to let go and follow my breath instead. Living in this culture, and often faced with surprising twists of reality, I've found that I've become more easygoing and spontaneous.

One of the few stable and predictable things in my life is the Ashtanga primary series, which often starts my day. As I move through each pose, I take comfort from this routine within a life of no routine. (The predictability also helps when I attend classes taught in Czech: When I know, for example, that the next posture will be Head-to-Knee Pose, I can learn the words for head, *blava*, and knee, *koleno*.)

This sense of continuity is an anchor, especially when Prague shows me its dark side. Last summer was one of those times: The social life I had worked hard to build imploded all at once when three of my closest friends left Prague, my yoga comrades all got day jobs and stopped coming to class, and I lost a Czech friend after a fizzled attempt at romance.

I know everything is transient—especially connections to people in a community of foreigners—but that didn't help. I found myself wandering the streets of Prague, the ache of loneliness in my throat, wondering if I should leave too, if this was my cue. But where would I go? Not home yet... wherever home was. I realized I did not feel like anywhere was home.

FEELING THE LOVE

Confused, I went to a group meditation session at the Shambhala center in search of clarity, or at least a break from thinking. At a pub following the meditation, a senior member passed me a sheet of study questions and asked, "Do you want to give a dharma talk?"

I was surprised and flattered. But my enthusiastic acceptance was immediately followed by a private bout of nerves: Give a dharma talk? Me? In this state? I had only two weeks to prepare.

My study question was about *metta* practice, a type of meditation in which you send lovingkindness first to yourself, then

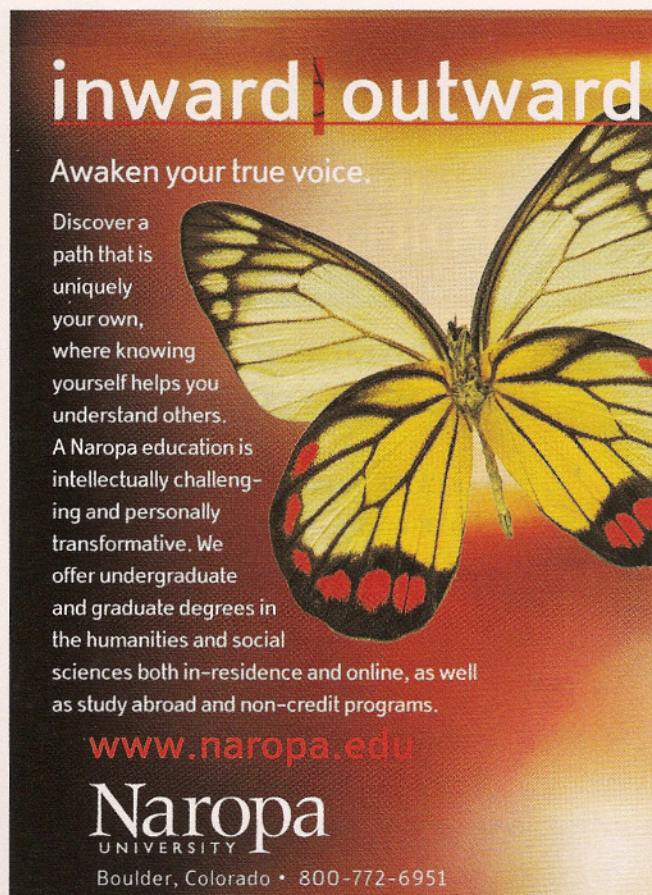
to loved ones, then to people for whom you have neutral feelings, then to people you find difficult, and finally to all beings. The next morning I sat on my cushion and took the first step: I gathered all my love and sent it right back into my own lonely heart. As I breathed for many minutes, the love began to grow.

Then I thought of the many friends I've made during my travels, people I've met on trains, in hostels, in cafés—beautiful souls now scattered far and wide. I took the love welling inside and sent it to those people, imagined light going out to each of them in a web that expanded point by point until it covered the planet. That web of light was my spirit expanding, embracing the world.

All of these friends are part of me, I realized. They have all enlarged my sense of self, of belonging. In fact, they have made the whole world my home. I breathed for many moments in awareness of the impermanence of relationships, of attachments, and especially of loneliness. Loneliness is just an emotional state, I understood, and

like ot
sient a
to eve
never
WH
talk, I
lish to
trans
usual
prise
pleas
my h
enlig

GOO
Beca
pora
sayin
goul
alley
each
frie:
lots
mak
is al
thir




inward | outward

Awaken your true voice.

Discover a path that is uniquely your own, where knowing yourself helps you understand others. A Naropa education is intellectually challenging and personally transformative. We offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in the humanities and social sciences both in-residence and online, as well as study abroad and non-credit programs.

www.naropa.edu

Naropa
UNIVERSITY
Boulder, Colorado • 800-772-6951



Yoga Alliance

Creating standards, credibility, visibility and community.

Call us or visit our website for information and applications to join our voluntary national Registry of Yoga Teachers (RYT) and Yoga Teacher Training Schools (RYS) at www.yogaalliance.org, (877) 964-2255, (301) 868-4700 or e-mail us at info@yogaalliance.org

like other emotions its essence is transient and illusory. We are all connected to everything at every moment; we can never really be alone.

When the time came for my dharma talk, I described this experience in English to the group, while my friend Mirek translated. Afterward he said, "You are usually so quiet in discussion. I was surprised you had so much insight." I was pleased, even if the compliment did swell my head, taking me a step further from enlightenment.

GOODBYE GIRL

Because I know my stay in Prague is temporary, I try to live each day as though I'm saying goodbye. I savor the second-rate goulash in my favorite pubs, wander down alleyways in the snow, pace the length of each bridge, stay up philosophizing with friends until dawn. And though I've had lots of practice by now, saying goodbye still makes me sad. But I've learned that there is also joy in goodbyes, in accepting that things must change. And I know my heart

can hold both joy and sadness very deeply at once.

Traveling has made the truth of impermanence more apparent to me. But if and when I return to the States, my greatest wish is to maintain the foreigner's perspective—to remain flexible, spontaneous, and open. Living as a yogi means experiencing life with intense awareness, and though I know this will be more challenging when life seems ordinary or routine, I've learned that cultivating that awareness is an essential practice.

I came to Prague seeking transformation. And I have grown more capable of appreciating the constant transformation of myself and of all things. Most important, I've realized that I'm not a solo traveler at all. None of us is solo. We are all woven together in a web more beautiful, and more melancholy, than we had thought possible. ■

Kristin Barendsen, a longtime contributor to Yoga Journal, writes about art and theater for the Prague Post.

YOGA JOURNAL Issue 189 (ISSN 0191-0965), established in 1975, is published seven times a year (Feb., April, June, Aug., Oct., Nov., and Dec.) by Yoga Journal, L.L.C., 475 Sansome Street, Suite 850, San Francisco, CA 94111, (415) 591-0555. Annual Subscription: U.S. \$21.95; Canada \$28.95; overseas \$43.95. Single copies U.S. \$4.99; Canada \$6.99. Agreement number 40032275 assigned by Canada Post. Mailing list: Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies unless the subscriber advises us otherwise. Send all subscription matters and notices of changes of address to: Yoga Journal, P.O. Box 51151, Boulder, CO 80322-1151. **E-mail the subscription customer service department: yogajournal@neodata.com. Call subscription customer service, Mon.-Fri. 7 a.m.-10 p.m. CST, Sat. 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. CST: (800) 600-YOGA or (303) 604-7435 from outside the United States.** All issues of *Yoga Journal* are now available on microfiche from ProQuest, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48016. Copyright 2005 by Yoga Journal L.L.C. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher. *Yoga Journal* is not responsible for advertising claims. Periodicals Postage Paid at San Francisco, CA, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to YOGA JOURNAL, P.O. Box 51151, Boulder, CO 80322-1151. The editorial content of *Yoga Journal* should not be used as a substitute for professional health care. Talk with your doctor before starting any new exercise regimen.

Toe Sox™ Yoga Pilates

- non-slip sole for superior grip
- reduces moisture
- hygienic alternative to bare feet
- natural cotton for optimum comfort & fit

Toll Free: 1.877.4TOESOX (1.877.486.3769)
www.toesox.com info@toesox.com

breathe
sweat
flow
live
bend
yoga gear
for the hot.

Shakti®
 ACTIVEWEAR
 954.242.0378
www.shaktiactivewear.com