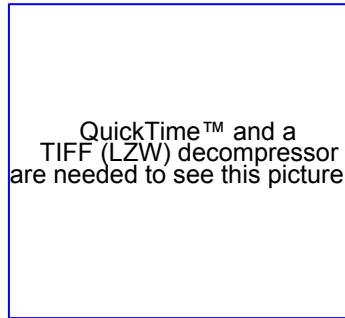


The 10 Commandments for Visiting a New Age Ashram

by Mitchell Lewis Ditkoff



During the past two decades, a curious phenomenon has swept this nation. Inspired by the teachings of several Master souls from the East, an unusually large number of *ashrams*, and *retreats* have made their appearance on the scene -- spiritual centers designed to provide seekers of the truth with a focused environment in which to practice their particular spiritual path.

While most people who spend time in these places are extremely dedicated and sincere, there still remains a goodly number who, in their attempt to have "an experience," miss the point completely. Seduced by the Western notion of cause and effect, they somehow think that spiritual attainment is related to the way they *act* -- as if God were some kind of transcultural Santa Claus looking for good little boys and girls to bring his shiny red fire trucks to. Not surprisingly, the *spirit* of the law is all too often traded for the *letter* -- a letter that, no matter how many stamps are put on it, is continually returned for insufficient postage. *Surrender* is replaced by *submission*; *patience* by *hesitation*; and *humility* by *timidity*. Alas, in the name of *finding* themselves, our God-seeking brothers and sisters have tended to *lose* the very thing that makes them truly human -- their *individuality*.

And so, with great respect to your personal God, your Guru, your Guru's Guru, and your favorite tax-deductible charity, I humbly offer you the following soul-saving tips should you decide to visit (or move into) the ashram or spiritual center of your choice. Take what you can, leave the rest, and remember -- it's not whether your shoes are on or off, but if your heart is open.

1. Do Not Change the Way You Walk

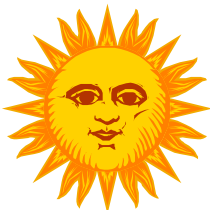
Most visitors to a spiritual retreat think they have to change the way they walk if they are truly going to have a meaningful experience. Somehow, they believe there is a direct correlation between the way they move their *feet* and the amount of "grace" or "blessings" about to enter their



lives. The "spiritual walk," is actually a not-too-distant cousin of the "museum walk," the curious way a person slows down and shuffles knowingly, yet humbly, past a Monet (or is it a Manet?), silently getting the essence of the Masterpiece even as they move noddingly towards that incomprehensible cubist piece in the next room. If you like, think of the spiritual walk as the complete opposite of the on-the-way-to-work-walk or the exiting-a-disco-in-New York walk. Simply put, the spiritual walk is a way of moving that practitioners believe will attract small deer from nearby forests -- deer that will literally walk right up to them and eat from their hand -- more proof to anyone in the general vicinity that they are, in fact, enlightened souls, humble devotees, children of God, or the so-far-unacknowledged successors to their guru's lineage.

Ideally, the spiritual walk should be taken in sandals, though Reeboks or Chinese slippers will do in a pinch. Cowboy boots are definitely out, as are galoshes, high heels, and Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars.

2. Do Not, Under Any Circumstances, Succumb to the Spiritual Nod



Closely related to the spiritual *walk*, the spiritual *nod* is routinely practiced in retreats the world over. And while no one completely comprehends its divine origins, many believe it began when a blissful brother simply forgot the name of his roommate on his way to the bathroom. Instead of issuing the familiar Sanskrit phrase of the week, our trend-setting friend simply tightened his lips, looked at the ground and... well... *nodded*. Now, every time you walk by someone at the ashram, you are half-expected to flash them the *nod*, the non-verbal equivalent

of "Hi! I know you know, and *you* know / know, and you know that I know that you know, and in my knowing, I know that I know you know, and by so knowing, need not speak, since words are finite and cannot express the *knowingness* which the two of us (being one) share from such a knowful place. Know what I mean?"

3. Do Not Judge Anyone, Including Yourself

This is the hardest of all commandments to obey. Why? Because spiritual environments not only bring out the *best* in people, they also bring out the worst. And while the worst is often more difficult to detect than the bliss of people wanting you to notice how blissful they are, the higher you get, the easier it is to notice -- that is, *if* you are looking for it. Of course, it would be *very* easy to spend your entire spiritualized retreat noticing all the subtle ego trips going on around you. *Resist this temptation with all your might!* Do not, I repeat, *do not*, focus on the stuff that would make good material for this article. You have no right. In fact, you have absolutely no idea *why* anyone is there, *what* their motivation is, or *how* they will learn the kinds of lessons you are absolutely sure they need to learn. In reality, you are most likely seeing your own projections -- those disowned parts of your self that you've refused to acknowledge all these years: your spiritual groupie, your brownie point collector, your junkie for more experience, your suburban yogi, your guilty seeker of God, your con man, your eunuch, your resolution maker, your ass watcher, your closet fanatic, your glutton for humble pie, your too poetic definer of ecstasy, your flaming bullshit artist, your know-it-all, your have-it-all, your spring-headed bower towards anyone with more than two devotees. *All of them are you!* Every single one of them! Don't *judge* them. *Love them!* *Bring them tea!* *Rub their feet every chance you get!*



4. Do Not Think That *This Is the Only Place Where It Is Happening*



Spiritual retreatants have a marked propensity to think that the grounds they inhabit are somehow more blessed than any place else on earth -- that they are privy to a special command performance by God, revealing himself in thousands of exotic ways for those lucky enough to *be* there, while thousands, nay millions, of George Bush-like souls are stumbling around in uncool places recently vacated by the Power of Life so a very cosmic thing can happen *here* and *only here* this weekend. Life, in fact, is often perceived as so good in the "Center," that the *rest* of the world becomes eerily cast as the "booby prize." Indeed, to new age seekers, everything else is simply referred to as "the world," much like Manhattanites speak of New Jersey. In short, the new age retreat comes to represent all that is *good* -- about God, about the Guru, about *life itself*. Somehow ("and I don't know how, but you could ask *anyone* who was there this weekend") flowers seem *sweeter* there, the moon seems *fuller*, the air seems *cleaner*. Even the *bread* tastes better. If you glimpse a shooting star at night, it's the "guru's grace." If you see a double rainbow, it's directly over the *meditation hall*.

I guess it's all in how you look at it. The same shooting star convincing you that your guru is, in fact, the *Supreme* Guru, was also seen by a plumber named Leroy who just happened to be drinking a beer in between innings of the Mets game. His conclusion? The Mets were gonna win 20 of the next 25 and bring the pennant home to Flushing!

What do the signs in the sky (or what we *perceive* as signs) really mean? Isn't the whole *world* our ashram? Isn't the *real* issue one of *appreciating* what is happening all around us? The flowers? The stars? The beggars asking for spare change? Flowers aren't any sweeter on retreat. It's our willingness to breathe deeply and *enjoy* them that's different. What's stopping us from being in

this place right now? What's stopping us from realizing that the very ground beneath our feet *is* the promised land -- wherever we happen to be at the time.

5. Do Not Put a Red Dot on Your Forehead If You Don't Want To

Unless you've been living in a trailer park your whole life, you probably *already* know what the red dot thing is all about. That's right. *The third eye. The sixth chakra. High holiness. INDIA!!* While sometimes mistaken for a beauty mark or a random bit of watermelon, the little red dot is actually a useful reminder to focus one's attention



on the space between the eyebrows, which, for some people, is where God lives (or if not lives, at least *vacations*). Nothing wrong with that, now is there? Still, you have to concede that the third eye isn't the *only* spot on the human body that's sacred. What about the *earlobes? The belly button? The nipples?* They come from God, too -- not too mention chakras #1 - 5 and the highly under-represented center of consciousness at the crown of the head. Sacred, every one of them! Don't you think that, if the body is the temple of the soul, it follows that our entire physical structure is sacred? Shouldn't we be *covered* from head to toe with little red dots? And if so, why is it that we routinely *quarantine* people with measles -- the very people who have selflessly chosen to manifest disease just to remind us to honor our body's ultimate holiness?

6. Play With the Children

The only sentient beings free from the collective mentality of spiritual seekers are the children.

Children visiting "holy places." in fact, behave the same way the world over no matter *what* adjectives

their elders use for the unspeakable name of God. When they're hungry, they eat. When they're tired, they sleep. They cry when they want to, laugh for no reason, consume ice cream without guilt, and rarely wonder why *your* picture of the Master is bigger, newer, or better framed.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

7. Fart At Your Own Risk

If you fart, and there's no one around to hear it at the monastery, did it happen? And if it *did* happen, does that mean you've been disrespectful? Is the resident *Guru* able to hear you? And if he or she is meditating, out of the country, or dead, is *their* guru or their guru's guru able to hear you? And if so, so what? Will you be reborn as a gerbil? Does the *Guru* fart? And if it's OK for him or her to pass wind, why not you? OK, so it's *their* place and you're a *guest*. But after all, aren't we *all* guests here? Even the *Guru*? Who do *they* answer to? And if it's not the same one *you're* answering to, what the hell are you doing getting up at five in the morning and sitting in the lotus position? Maybe the *real* question isn't whether or not it's permissible to fart on holy ground, but *how* you fart. For instance, if you're farting out of a blatant disregard for the Master's teachings or the sincerity of his or her followers, you might want to reconsider where you're coming from. However, if your farting is just a random release of gas, relax! Give yourself the benefit of the doubt. You see, a typical visit to a spiritual center quickens one's ability to "let go" -- so what you call "farting" may, in fact, be a timely sign of your evolving spiritual condition.



8. Do Not Think You Are Higher or Lower Than Anyone Else



One of the favorite pastimes of people visiting a spiritual retreat is *comparing* themselves to everyone else. "See the guy over there carrying firewood? He's a very old soul -- way older than me. Been on the path for years. And that dude laughing hysterically in the corner? That's *Shiva*.

Oops, he can probably see through me, maybe I better walk around the *other* way."

Want to save yourself some time? Don't try to figure out how "on the path" anybody else is. It's impossible. Stare into the eyes all you want, watch for tell-tale signs of liberation, but when it comes right down to it, the only conclusion you'll reach will be *your own* -- one that may have absolutely nothing to do with the anything but your own projections. Face it, how accurate is your assessment going to be when 99 percent of humanity couldn't tell that the carpenter from Galilee had something special going for him? Indeed, it's not at all unlikely that the beer-bellied, first-time visitor you met this morning at the ashram is, at this very moment, being treated like a spiritual mongoloid by everyone who meets him (repeatedly being asked if "this is your first time") when, in fact, the beer-bellied, first-time visitor is actually the reincarnation of Buddha.

9. Do Not Think That You Are Going to Get Something

Many people visit a spiritual retreat because they want to *get* something. They want "clarity" or "contentment," "enlightenment" or "grace," "blessings" or "peace of mind." At the very least, they want their business to improve or their marriage to be saved. Alas, they miss the point completely: If you try to *get*, you will lose, left only with the sinking feeling of having just bought \$300



worth of lottery tickets only to learn that some electrician from Staten Island just won the whole thing. Look, it's really very simple. You don't go to a spiritual center (or a Big Time Teacher, for that matter) to *get*. You go to give, to *let go* -- to relax your grip on the very thing that's been separating you from *getting* all these years: Your *grasping*. Your *fear*. Your well-rehearsed strategy to realize God.

10. Do Not Feel Compelled to Change Your Name

OK, so your name is *Joey*. Ever since you were knee high to a can of Cheese Whiz, everyone called you Joey -- as in, "Hey, *Joey*, what's goin' down, bro'?" Yeah, you grew up in Brooklyn, cut school once a week, and dated a chick named Angela with *very* big boobs. Great. So, here you are at the *ashram* and ba-bing, you run smack into a bunch of dudes with names like *Arjuna*, *Govinda*, *Namdev*, *Shanti*, *Krishna*. "Hey," you think to yourself, "maybe they got something I don't."

Guess what? They do. They have *spiritual names* given to them by their Guru -- names that make their mothers somewhat close-lipped around the canasta table. And while these names are clearly given with a purpose, the fact of the matter is -- they are irrelevant. Do you think the people in *India* who have spiritual experiences get their names changed to *Eddie*, *Gino*, *Stacey*, or *Shirley*? Hey, what difference does it make? *You are not your name -- even if your namesake was enlightened.* It doesn't matter *what* they call you, when it's time to go, you're gone. The only name worth knowing at that time is *God's* name -- and that, my friend, no matter how many mantras you've memorized, can never be pronounced.

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