

Lydia Gottwald

“Happiness is All Perception”

I interviewed a family friend who went on a journey when she found that she was unsatisfied with her life, and to find happiness for herself. My friend grew up in South Africa, had been working as a teacher in Johannesburg for a few years, and had been dating her boyfriend for eight years. She realized that they no longer wanted the same things in life, and that he and her career were not making her happy. She decided that to figure out what she wanted from her life, she'd go on an adventure. She traveled to a village in South Korea, where she taught English at the local school for six months. She then traveled around Cambodia and Vietnam for two months. In Cambodia, she went to a retreat where in exchange for your volunteer work in the community, they provide you with a bed, food, Buddhist lessons, and yoga classes. After this she came to stay with my family, and worked at a summer school for kids with reading disabilities. When the school ended, she traveled throughout the southern United States, from New Orleans, through Arizona, to San Diego. From there she went to a yoga and meditation retreat in Mexico for a month and a half, where she attended yoga classes, lessons on yoga philosophy, and for ten days practiced deep meditation, and was completely silent. After that, she volunteered on a mushroom farm in Guatemala, then spent a few days by the beach in El Salvador. She left Central America, and flew back to Boston to spend a few days with my family, then flew back home to Johannesburg.

Interview

Why did you decide to go on your adventure?

I felt like I was just following social norms, checking things off that people normally do. I went to university, had a job, had a long term boyfriend. But I felt like I was living a robotic life, like I was just existing. My life felt like a mundane routine. I had had this feeling before, but I pushed it down and ignored it, because I thought it would go away. I would find joy in little things, like I would be happy during weekends, and on holidays, but the feeling kept coming back. I wanted to travel and experience something new to get out of the routine life I was living. I had wanted to go before, but it didn't feel possible, because I'd have to quit my job, and I thought it

would be too expensive. But I realized that I was just making excuses, because that was so much easier than following through with what I wanted to do.

What have you learned about yourself by going on this trip?

I learned to love myself. Before I went on this trip, I thought that self love was egotistical and selfish. But I learned that it is extremely important. I learned that you should be your own best friend, and that you should be complete on your own. Because sometimes you are alone, and on this trip I learned that I'm capable of more than I realized.

There must have been times when traveling was hard, what kept you going?

This changed throughout the trip. At the beginning, what kept me going was my connection to my family. With technology I could call them whenever I wanted to, so when things got hard I would talk to my family more. I also knew that if I needed to, I could always go home. But after a while, I gained a newfound faith in the universe, and my confidence in myself grew. When things went wrong, I was able to view them differently. I learned that every tricky situation has a lesson, and I learned from that. In every difficult time, there was always someone that would help me out, normally complete strangers who were just very kind. I learned that even if something goes wrong, things always work out in the end.

Did your days of silence change your way of thinking at all? What did you learn from that experience?

I became aware of how I was thinking. People call it a monkey mind, its always chattering, always talking nonsense. When your brain has a fact, it makes up a story to go along with it. Like, if someone doesn't text you back, your mind says "they don't like me, I must not be good enough", even though that's totally made up, and probably not true at all. I became aware of how much my mind dramatizes things, and how much the world dramatizes things. Things aren't that big of a deal. It's our reactions to things that make them a big deal. I became more aware of my own negative self thought too. When

you can't talk or read, you can't distract yourself from what is going on in your own head. If I looked in a mirror, I would tell myself in my head, "your ears are sticking out", or "you're too fat", and that had been going on for so long that I didn't notice it anymore. But during the days of silence I was really aware of it. And when you're aware of what's going on, you can change it. Instead of being absorbed in what happens in your own head, you can just be a witness to your thoughts. I can still feel my emotions, but I don't have to identify with them. If I feel sad, I don't have to be sad. And I try to not let myself get sucked up in my emotions, because they pass.

Another thing that changed during the days of silence, was that since I wasn't talking, all of my other senses came alive. I had been at the yoga school for more than twenty days before I did the days of silence, but it wasn't until then that I saw how beautiful the place was. I saw the blue sky, and noticed beautiful flowers, and realized how beautiful the view was. I also slowed down, and really enjoyed my food. I tasted every taste, I smelled every smell. All of my senses became heightened.

When you're meditating all day, you're internalizing a lot. Suppressed emotions came up, and you have no distractions, so you have to face them, and deal with them.

I want to try and have one day a month in silence. A lot of the time, we just listen so that we can respond to what the person said, and we don't really listen. We respond to people with a similar experience that we had, or something else about ourselves that we relate to what the person said. When I'm in silence, I learn to really listen, and not think about myself.

Has yoga and meditation changed you at all? What have you learned from your practice?

I had a huge paradigm shift. The yoga made me more mindful in all that I do. Like, I'm no longer eating animal products. I love the taste of meat, but when I'm really mindful and I'm honest about what the animal went through, I don't want to eat the meat. I don't want to be part of the violence the animal went through. It also made me think more about peace. Yoga's not a religion, but it provides philosophy and principles to live by. Like you shouldn't lie and steal. And when you are really mindful about

what you do, you find that you lie and steal in tiny ways. Yoga heightens your awareness of everything around you.

The yoga school that I was at concentrates on Eastern philosophies, which was new to me. I learned a lot about non-dualism, which says that no two things are separate. Everything is connected. At first this was really hard for me to understand, and was totally foreign to me, but then I learned to feel that I'm not separate from anything. This changed how I view others and interact with others. When you judge someone, it just shows what you are insecure about. Everything is a mirror. The world shifts a lot because of your own perspective.

I was brought up Jewish, but it never really made any sense to me. At university, I became an atheist. I was always curious about god and religion, but I never found any meaning in it. At the yoga school, I found what god is in a way that makes sense to me. It's not religious at all, but how I view what god should be. Everything is connected. For me, its like being connected to my spiritual heart, who I truly am, without my personality, thoughts, or attachments. Its hard to understand, and I'm still trying to figure it out. I think this is what religions want to show, but because it's hard to understand, religions use a physical representation like Jesus, or Hindu Gods, to explain the connection to this spiritual heart. Its energy that connects the world, oneness, consciousness.

I hear how yoga has changed you, would you say that this trip changed your spirituality?

Yes, it helped me come to this realization, it was like lighting a tiny fire in my heart.

Do you think that this trip has helped you find meaning in your life, or do you think there is a meaning to life?

My thoughts aren't concrete on this. But I think the meaning of life is to love, to be happy, and to serve. I've found that serving others, and yourself is the same thing. Before the trip, I thought of my purpose almost like a job. I've always wanted to make the world better, make a positive impact. I thought I had to do something big. But now I

understand that I have to serve myself first. If I am completely happy, I'm contributing to the happiness of the whole world. But I'm still not sure if that's quite enough. Even if you're doing good work, but you're not happy, that's not right, because your unhappiness makes your family unhappy.

What is happiness to you? How would you define it?

For me, it's inner peace, living from your heart. You have to abandon societal norms, and your harsh thoughts. You have to live in the moment. You can't stop following social norms completely, they still have a place, but you need to find a balance.

Living completely in the moment you're in is important. You shouldn't go through life worrying. Worry only comes from the future and the past, so if you live in the here and now, you won't worry.

I've been reading authors, and masters who are able to put ideas like this into their books, so I can stay inspired to make sure I live the way that's right for me.

Did you learn anything about what makes other people happy by meeting people in so many different parts of the world?

Everyone is different. Individuality is very important. The people I met who were the happiest and were laughing all the time were the poorest people, who had nothing. They didn't know when the next time is that they would eat, but they were so happy. We are attached to physical things, and we're always thinking about the next thing. The more we have, the more we think we need, when will I get a better job, why don't I have that car, or why don't I have nicer clothes? We try and fill a void with objects. But if you fill your life with the joy of simple things, you can be so happy. Happiness is all perception.

You live in a very violent area, how do you maintain your own peace when there's so much violence around you?

Meditation. It helps me to maintain my inner peace. And not reacting to violence with violence. We must react to violence with peace in order to break the cycle.

Conclusion

This interview reflects many of the ideas and philosophies we discussed in class. My friend voices many Buddhist ideas. She describes using yoga and meditation to get in touch with her body and to find inner peace. She also uses meditation to train her mind to get rid of negative thought and to concentrate on important things in life, like happiness. She discusses the idea that happiness is all about perception and your state of mind. We also talked about the importance of simple miracles, like when she describes how she was able to see colors more vibrantly, and smell and taste with more purpose. The transient nature of the world and emotions was also discussed, her realization of this fact allows her to live without being controlled by her emotions, which also reflects a Stoic point of view.

My friend has also learned the importance and has started to have the ability to rid herself of the desire for material goods, and western status symbols. She is learning that she must flow with whatever comes her way, which is reflective of a Taoist perspective. She is also beginning to understand the non-dualistic way of the world, which appears in both Buddhism and Taoism. She has also made a very Epicurean discovery, that the meaning of life is to be happy.