



STEADFAST FREEDOM YOGA

From the Inside Out: Service and Yoga in Peru **By Arthur Strimling**

Machu Picchu! Yoga! Service! Last April I saw a beautiful card at Vira Yoga offering a New Year's retreat led by Zhenja La Rosa and Jordan Mallah that would culminate at Machu Picchu on New Year's Eve – with a full moon, a blue moon, yet. Wow! I have harbored a dream to go to Machu Picchu longer than Zhenja and Jordan have been alive. Plus practicing daily for two weeks with these superb inspiring teachers! Plus an opportunity to be of service in a Peruvian village helping to cultivate a garden of life! It sounded almost too idyllic to be true, so my wife, Lisa, and I signed on right away.

Machu Picchu, Yoga, Service; those were my priorities when we signed on to the journey. But now, looking back, the priorities have changed. In one sense they have reversed, because the service experience transformed and informed everything else. And in another sense the priorities have disappeared because in the living of it, the elements became a unity.

Machu Picchu is a spectacular, spiritual, transcendent, fascinating, wonder of the world. The journey and our time there more than lived up to my thirty-year dream. And the Yoga was, in Jordan's words, "Off the charts!" So my first two priorities more than met my hopes and expectations. But the service experience is now what lingers most powerfully. It infused and changed everything else. Let me explain.

Our service took place in a tiny remote village called La Grama in the Northeast of Peru, where Jordan was a Peace Corps volunteer from 2003-2005. It's hard to describe how remote La Grama is. In the jet age, the thousands of miles are nothing compared to the cultural, technological, historical, and temporal distances. Before we left, Jordan explained that, although almost anything could grow in La Grama, traditional nutrition there was based on potatoes and guinea pig. Yes, guinea pigs! Those cute kid pets turn out to be one of the highest protein meats in the animal world and a staple of the Peruvian diet. During his two years in La Grama, Jordan, himself a vegetarian/vegan, had focused on introducing both new fruits and vegetables and organic gardening methods. Some people in La Grama took this up in their individual gardens, and now it was time to try something more ambitious. Our service would be working with townspeople to prepare and plant a large communal garden behind the village school, which the kids, teachers and some local farmers would maintain after we left.

We flew out of New York in a blinding terrifying snow storm, and after a long night and day of airports and planes, landed in a mining city in northern Peru called Cajamarca. We straggled out to collect our luggage, a motley crew of New Yorkers -- fashionistas, PR types, a couple of newly unemployed taking advantage of severance and time off, serious intellectuals, and seriously not, a Spanish teacher, a retired real estate mogul, computer geeks, a theater bum, a genetic counselor, a hostess, four Yoga teachers and a Cantor -- arriving in a city most of us had never heard of, on our way to a town no one had ever heard of. Everyone seemed nice enough, everyone was hopeful, but at this moment everyone was cranky and wanted nothing more adventurous than a hot shower, a decent meal and a good bed.

Jordan's Peace Corps buddy, Doug, joined us in the airport. Jordan was over the top with joy to see him, and he seemed very nice, but at the moment he was just way too sunny for me to deal with. Dragging ourselves and our luggage, we turned a corner and were met by a crowd singing, playing and clapping the most charming and warm song of greeting and friendship. Do they greet everybody like this in Cajamarca or is this spectacular welcome for us? It was for us; it was Jordan's Peruvian family, gray hairs to toddlers, who had come in force to welcome us. We all melted, and stood there just grinning or dancing or joining in the song. Instantly we felt held in what we came to know as a special Peruvian quality of deep hospitality.

After a night in a lush hot spring spa, we climbed onto a bus and rode for hours through mountains and small towns. It reminded me of Tuscany, but poorer and no grapevines. Finally we curved our way down (through 33 curves according to Hernan, Jordan's Peruvian father) into a valley, and entered the mud streets and crumbling adobe houses of La Grama. The streets were mostly empty, but for stray dogs, and the occasional woman in Andean dress strolling along spinning wool as she went. The mountains around were beautiful, but there was nothing cute or picturesque here. La Grama is not a tourist town.

The bus poured us out in front of a house with a long pink Hollyhock stemming out into the street. An old, old man sat staring at us. A sturdy woman came out and dove into Jordan's arms. This was Nattie, our hostess; we would eat all our meals on her patio and her kitchen would become the center of our little universe in La Grama.

Nattie became the soul of La Grama for us, a modest, powerful woman, who seemed always to be working and always to be delighted by us and life. When he and Zhenja first started dreaming of this project, Jordan called Nattie and she said, "Your dream is my dream." She and a couple of friends learned to cook vegetarian meals in styles that would appeal to us (definitely not the style in La Grama). She had been keeping an organic garden long enough for us to eat freely from it, and her cow provided all our milk and, with Nattie's help, a wonderful variety of yogurts and cheeses.

As we unpacked, we began to appreciate the incredible lengths that Jordan and Zhenja had gone to make us safe and secure in a place where a lot could go wrong. Just finding housing with concrete (as opposed to dirt) floors was an accomplishment; 35 water cooler-sized jugs of water had been imported from Cajamarca, as well as installing

showers and buying everything from mattresses to bedding. And there were our safety instructions: parasite ridden livestock – pigs, chickens, sheep, cows, horses – roamed the streets had to be avoided; we had to be careful to shake elbows, not hands, with farmers who might have been up to their elbows in manure all day; if a wild dog – and they all were -- barked and threatened, we were instructed to pick up a stone and threaten to throw it. (This last rule offended the delicate dog sensibility of us Park Slope and Manhattan dog owners, but I have to admit that it worked – and it became almost a guilty pleasure). We felt protected, held, but watchful and concerned too.

The first principal of Anusara is Attitude, and we came to La Grama loaded with good intentions, gardening gloves and lots of gifts. We would be there for Christmas, which Jordan rightly saw as an opportunity to bring much needed school supplies, clothes, toys, and even organic gardening manuals (in Spanish!).

The next morning we picked up brand new picks, shovels and wheelbarrows, and paraded through the town to the school. I felt a little like Paris Hilton on the farm in my new hiking pants and wicking shirt with a shiny new pick over my shoulder, but eager to get to work. We passed a shop with a sign advertising ‘fotocopies’ and a pig lying in the doorway. Change is coming to La Grama in its own way.

The school is at the end of a wide, particularly rutted and muddy street (just past the fotocopia shop). The school yard is a big dusty, muddy field -- La Grama manages to be both dusty and muddy at the same time. Children running around or standing in groups stop and stare at us. We greet them and they shyly tell their names and shake hands. The school principal arrives and invites us to sit in the shade, while the 120 kids stand in rows in the burning sun. They are small and lean, dressed in clothes that look handed down since beyond memory, and a lot more obedient than Park Slope kids their age. The principal calls ‘Attention!’ and they snap to, like little soldiers. ‘At ease!’ ‘Attention!’ ‘At Ease!’ After several rounds, they stand ‘At Ease,’ for a long time in the hot sun, while we sit in the shade as the principal makes a speech welcoming us. My Spanish is minimal, but I hear the word ‘Intercambio,’ ‘Interchange’ a lot, as we will throughout the journey. It has both this hollow, rhetorical ring, and it’s as real as can be. We really are here, light years from our own world, shyly looking at the people of La Grama and they back at us, and all of us want more ‘intercambio.’ Then Jordan jumps up and gets the kids stretching and laughing, Lisa sings a little song, a couple more speeches, and we’re ready to go.

We file through a narrow courtyard out behind the school and face a football sized field sloping steeply up a hill. Mercifully, we’re only responsible for the bottom end, a flat area next to the school, where Jordan explains we will turn this rich, rocky, weed infested ground into a series of raised beds. Several men and women from La Grama are there to work with us. The prime local collaborators are Miguel, Brenner, Magno, and Joselito, young strong farmers, who know this soil and how to work it, just not this way. Some of us start weeding, some measuring out the plots. I’m with the measurers, and it’s a little Three Stooges at first as we fumble to figure out how to measure and cut the string, find stakes, etc. Eventually the La Grama guys quietly take charge, and it gets done

expeditiously. Each of the 13 beds has an orange string fence and a foot-wide path all around, for easy weeding. We dig, pull stones, re-dig, pull more stones. Jordan seems to be everywhere, doing everything. Zhenja works quietly with Miguel, Magno and Brenner, sifting a bed to perfection; Berta, ever the teacher, gathers a crowd of kids, and as they pick stones she teaches songs, English words, who knows what, but they are having a ball. After weeding a huge stretch and carrying all the weeds to a compost heap, Amy, Lisa, Danielle and Lara goof with some kids by the tree where we shade our water, while Marjorie shows pictures of her dog, Dempsey, to a swarm of kids. Karen and Doug nurture their own plot. Mike and I are diggers, he with pick and shovel, me with a small short stemmed back hoe I've never seen before. Elaine is quietly useful everywhere, and Mark takes epic numbers of pictures. By lunch time we are toast, except for Zhenja and her new buddies. No one can pry them away from their gardening idyll. So we leave them and go to lunch.

After a long, talky lunch on Nattie's patio, and a siesta, we head to our first Yoga class, along the dirt main drag, instantly dubbed 'Broadway,' and turn the corner onto a wide rutted rock strewn path, more like a dry streambed than a street. A dog in a yard runs out and barks fiercely. Mike has the presence to follow Jordan's advice to pick up a stone and threaten back. The dog slinks away.

Our Yoga 'studio' was an outdoor patio/garage at the home of Jordan's Peruvian family, headed by Loli and Hernan, a handsome, well-walled structure that Jordan helped build when he moved to La Grama in 2003. The Yoga space faces a beautiful garden, with avocados the size of softballs dangling from a tree almost in our faces. There is room for all of us, we have our mats, we're serious Yogis who have been travelling for days, with only a few airport stretch outs; Zhenja and Jordan are fantastic teachers, and deepening our Yoga is one of the big intentions of the journey, so ... let's go!

But wait! Some people from the town are going to join us. Hernan and Loli and their three grandchildren, along with Miguel, Brenner, Magno, and a few others. This crowds the situation seriously, and I am getting impatient. After all, I came to practice 'serious' Yoga, and here we are dealing with some rank beginners, and in another language! There is a lot of discussion in Spanish; I give up my mat, but end up somehow getting a better one from Amy who seems to have packed as if she was outfitting our entire company to climb Everest, practice yoga, avoid every disease know to science, have snacks available at all times, and be Santa Claus' main helper. I'm doing my best to cover my impatience. Some may feel as I do, but Amy, Berta, Lisa, and most others are totally welcoming, rolling with the process, so I keep quiet, keep breathing, and try to disappear into my tiny patch of concrete next to the wall. Finally the local crowd is spread around so that they can hear Berta translate for them, and everyone has a mat and a place. Except these two scruffy twin boys, Eban and Elvis, who must be about 10 years old. They sit on the steps, leaning in toward the porch but not daring to join us, staring wide eyed, drinking everything in.

Finally Zhenja begins, and instantly everyone focuses, first toward her and Jordan, then into ourselves, and the space becomes sacred. All my notions of what the practice

'ought' to be; my big personal ambitions for this opportunity to practice daily with these great teachers, fly off into the garden and I'm just breathing and doing and aware of others, Yogis from New York and farmers from La Grama, breathing and doing with me. Mike and I help Miguel, strong as a bull, and as stiff, into his first handstand. He loves this Yoga and goes at everything with total commitment and good humor. We laugh a lot and he learns, and by the end of the week Miguel was determined to keep Yoga going in La Grama after we leave, and he is already teaching Naty. The lineage continues!

And I am reminded for the ten thousandth time that this is the practice. The better handstand, deeper shoulder loop will evolve ... or not. But the deepening connection to who and what are in front of me, around me, that's the true path. How many times am I going to have to learn this lesson?

At the end of practice we form a circle. I invite Eban and Elvis to come up and join us, but they hesitate, and Mike, bless him, goes over and picks up Eban and carries him into the circle. Elvis, almost invisibly, follows. Then Jordan asks us to go around the circle saying what we hope to give and receive from this time in La Grama. We gringos are used to this sort of exercise but some of the La Grama folks look a little uneasy. They do speak, however, and in surprising and moving ways, and when we finish and chant Om together, the bond is already real and deep, even if new and narrow.

These circles continued at each practice and as many of the responses as we could recall are posted at the end of this piece. For me a goal was to see if I could truly live in the rhythm of this place, even for a moment. I could sense that it is not just slower, a lot slower, it has a different beat, a different music around it.

On the second day, after more gardening and a nap, I arrive at the Yoga space early to stretch before class, and the scruffy twins, Eban and Elvis, are sitting on the porch steps staring hungrily as I set up the mat. They are sons of Sabina, who cooks and cleans here, and among the poorest of the poor in La Grama. I start to stretch, but their hunger captures me, and I invite them onto the mat – it takes some persuading, but first Eban comes and then shy Elvis. We do Crow and then headstand, which they pick up like a shot – oh to be ten! Now they are hooked, and all through the class they find places on the steps or the ground below to copy the poses as we do them.

In search of rhythm, I rise early and watch the passing parade in the weird new concrete town square, with its alarming statue of a young boy stooped under a huge bunch of bananas and a girl cuddling a guinea pig. A woman passes leading a regular pig on a rope. The pig is balky, stopping to sniff and root, like my dog in Prospect Park. Except a few minutes later I hear it squealing at the slaughter house – Christmas dinner! Everyone says, 'Buenas Dias.' One morning a man about my age with his 2 year old granddaughter, Eva, on his shoulder, stopped to talk. He told me about farming here his whole life, and his father and grandfather before him, and how the rivers are getting polluted by chemicals from the mines upriver around Cajamarca, and it's causing a 'plaga,' a plague in the farmlands, and how the government denies there is any pollution. Eva and I play finger games as he talks. He looks at her wistfully: 'I don't think she will be able to have

this life.’ And I got this sense several times; that as poor and repetitive as life here appears to us, for many in this place it is a good life and one they want to pass on to their children. Or as someone less contented told me, ‘Life is easy here; but nothing happens.’

For the next few days we repeat the cycle of outdoor school assemblies, with the kids standing in the sun and us sitting in the shade, listening to speeches; gardening, lunch, siesta, yoga and late long dinners. We sift the beds for stones; fertilize them with guinea pig poop, and then plant watermelons, herbs, tomatoes, beans, eggplant, leafy greens, broccoli, squash, zucchini, pumpkin, beets, carrots, peas, red, yellow, and green peppers, and more!

Finally, the beds are done. The next morning we practice yoga early and then head to the garden for a blessing ceremony. Jordan asks us to walk across town in silence, meditating on our blessings. We walk singly or in small groups, and I try to keep silent, but it’s impossible. Every towns person I pass, walking or leaning in doorways, stops us to say ‘Buenas Dias,’ and perhaps exchange a few stumbling phrases in Spanish. There is no way a person could get through La Grama in silence without insulting a lot of people. So no one gets to the garden in silence, and the journey takes three times longer than planned. And that’s the rhythm of La Grama. The climate, the dust, the mud, the ease of life, the curiosity and cordiality of the culture, it was all there in that short journey to the garden, and finally I felt it, and for a moment or two, lived it.

Meanwhile in our house of five women and me, a web was weaving that I barely noticed at first. Initially it seemed unexceptional; a group of women bonding in usual ways, with complements, little exchanges of clothes or cosmetics or oils or health advice or personal sagas and acknowledged feelings. ‘Tend and befriend,’ I think the feminist psychologists call it. Amy and Lara brought astonishing supplies of snacks and medications and clothes. We all brought presents for the kids of the town, but Marjorie and Lara literally brought bags. Susanne did lots of small chores in invisible ways, and I took care of weird bugs, sweeping the floor and threatening hostile dogs with rocks. At first I sort of watched this weaving, bemused, separate, a little mocking, a little jealous. As a guy, I felt safe enough in La Grama, not needing this web, which is what guys are sort of supposed to feel, and I and the other guys were doing what we do, bonding as we do, around stories of our strengths, our victories, our gadgets, our goals, helping out, making plans. The weave of women became a sort of running joke, as well as a deepening reality, and as the days passed I felt drawn in and grateful for the web. I began to look for, to welcome opportunities to ‘tend and befriend.’ We were in a remote place cut off from the usual supports, and all these connectors were weaving something strong. I could feel it; I think we all could.

Anusara Yoga encourages open heartedness, assisting, connecting, creating community. This yoga system lives in an ancient Tantric tradition called ‘householder’ yoga, which teaches yoga as both a means and a part of living in the larger world, rather than withdrawing from it, and at its heart is an unequivocal affirmation of life as it is, and therefore as it can be. The practice becomes a sort of laboratory for learning principals and practices that will help us enjoy a more refined, aligned and courageous life.

So everything seemed to be conspiring, collaborating, harmonizing to bring us into a deepening culture of caring. Every day I saw a dozen small kindnesses by and toward people in our group, our teachers, and people of the town. It was our circumstances and the grace of our yoga and the specialness of the people who came. I have travelled in groups all over the world, and never experienced anything quite like this.

Everyone we knew in the town came to see us off. It was an idyllic, heartbreaking leave until some street dogs ganged up on Miguel's old mutt and killed him, right there in the street in front of us all. Miguel was stoic; we were in shock. Life goes on in La Grama. It pulled us closer together.

The next day we gathered eight more yogis into our group and headed for Hanaq Pacha, an edenic retreat in the Sacred Valley of the Incas, and then on to Machu Picchu for a rain soaked moonless New Year's in the leaking home of the Inca Shaman of the Valley. It was all glorious and rich ... but that's another story for another time.

Hayaya!

What does Community Mean to You? December 23, 2009

Strength, union, sharing, acceptance, brotherhood, synergy, happiness, safety, connection, selflessness, love, union, hope, love, happiness, faith, spontaneity, interconnectedness, family, one heart, friendship, protection, trust, presence, support, collaboration

What do you Want to Cultivate in Your Life? December 24, 2009

Balance, clarity, laughter, faith, understanding, friendship, love, service, compassion, sharing, happiness, harmony, the sacred, softness, compassion, peace, family, focus, forgiveness, attitude, non-judgement, santosha, spirituality, acceptance, appreciation
Living the present moment

How do you Want to Add More Play into Your Life? December 25, 2009

Spend more time outside, celebrate each moment as a blessing, play more with my wife, travel more, work more, experience other cultures and places, place more effort into what I do, help others, enter into an intimate relationship, help the poor, play more in the kitchen, do more yoga, moo more, play fearlessly, not take myself so seriously, create more dinner parties/sharing/cooking, enjoy winter, find the kitchen, spend more time outside, have more fun with every thing I do, spend more time with friends, have more spontaneity, share-sing-dance-love