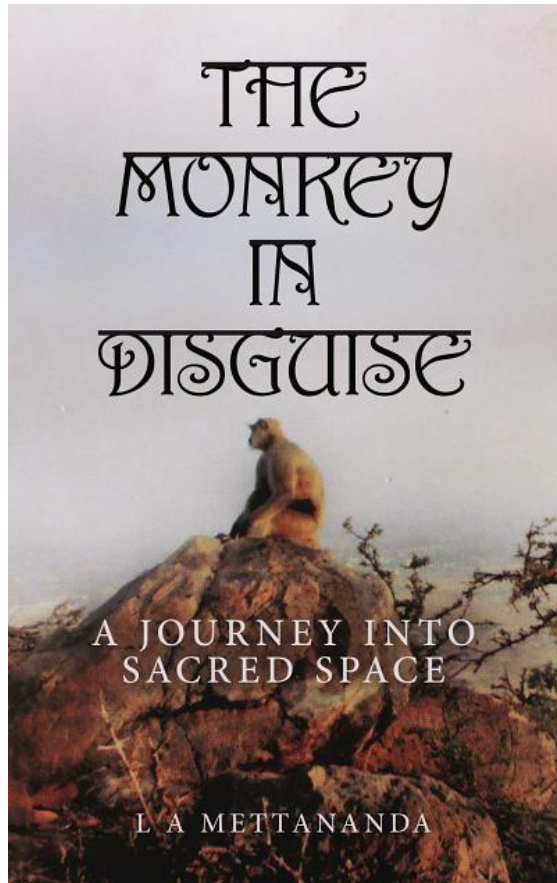


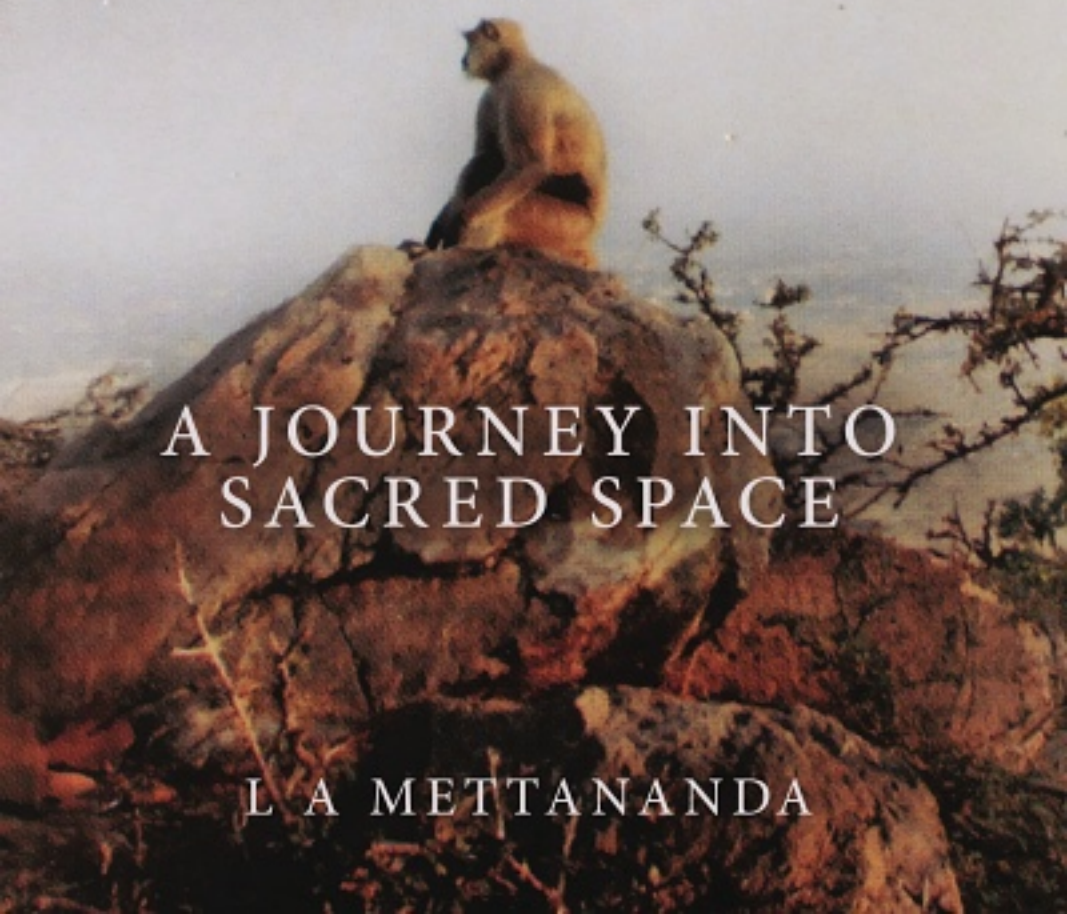


This is a story of spiritual pilgrimage, planned to last six months. Instead, it leads to an inner journey of discovery, unfolding over seven years.

The Monkey in Disguise: A Journey into Sacred Space
By L.A. Mettananda

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THE MONKEY IN DISGUISE



A JOURNEY INTO
SACRED SPACE

L A METTANANDA

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FOREWORD

Life is a funny thing. In my younger years, it seemed that every day was the succession of the previous day, a seemingly endless string of things to do, stuff to accomplish, goals to meet, targets to achieve. Then, after the occurrence of a few challenging realizations, it became clear that actually my life was just a sequence of particular steps that I later understood were stages in the reality of life and ill understood that these various stages could be viewed as little trips, all sequentially positioned to ultimately create a journey in this lifetime.

Throughout the years, I have met some wonderful and some not so wonderful people. I consciously chose to spend time with the people that resonated with me and took active steps to step away from the people that did not. The author is one of those people that I chose to be around. When first meeting him, his calm and friendly demeanor was evident. His sparkling eyes and witness gave away a clear mind and understanding of life.

After a few meetings and conversations, he related to me that he had something he would like for

me to read. I readily agreed and found the stories that he handed me very entertaining and apropos, considering the journey of life. I thoroughly enjoyed his perspective and his writing style; they were stories and observations during his travels in younger days through Southeast Asia, before and after he became a Buddhist monk.

After reading several of the stories, I encouraged him to put them together in a book format, so that his experiences and realizations might help other people to contemplate their own life's journey; to not take their current circumstance as the only reality they can see, but to possibly realize that each of those moments that we may find challenging are actually only stepping stones or rally stages in our journey of this lifetime.

I encourage you to read these stories from that perspective. I enjoyed them immensely!

Be well!

—Christian Reichhardt

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Chapter 5

THE PICNIC

*Once you have walked the path of life stream,
you will never be the same again.*

—Ma Tzu

A picnic journey to the King's castle, Paghman District, Afghanistan. It is not often that one is invited to a picnic in Afghanistan. In fact, hardly anyone here knows what a picnic is; however, The Traveler is invited to one.

It is winter, fifteen degrees, and outdoor sports are on hiatus. Nevertheless, the invite comes from The Baba, with a few specifics. The picnic will take place at one of the King's castles and will include the meaning of the following Koan: the one-one hundred, one-one thousand. The big idea, the One idea. The Baba says that, upon returning to Kabul, nothing will ever look the same again. Of course, the ego knows this is impossible!

Provisions in hand, a bus is required. The bus looks like a multi-colored art gallery on wheels. In addition to its beauty, it has bald tires, no shock

absorbers, windows, or heat. At departure, it is loaded beyond capacity with people, animals, and cargo. Even so, it is willing to challenge a road best described as a disaster in the making.

Along the way, bruised, chilled, and due to the compassion of some God, there is a chai stop. Hot chai—a bit of Heaven! Locals enshrouded in smoke rings from Hookahs observe quietly with an occasional toothless smile. A few sips later, the conductor announces departure. No one hesitates, lest they lose their ride.

Underway, the chill returns, bruises speak, and mercifully, the road ends. Walking is a relief as the towering Hindu Kush mountains come into view. Up and down hills, through foggy valleys, the background is of distant peaks and beautiful scenery—and a long walk. At one point, a grain silo appears in the fog. Atop it sit all-white pigeons entirely surrounding the perimeter. The Baba raises a hand, makes a circle, and the pigeons rise straight up and fly in circles above the silo.

Continuing on through sun and fog, the mountains loom nearer. Walking through a vineyard, The Baba suddenly stops, pauses, and does a dance so out of character that every fuse in The Traveler's mind is blown. Then silence. No thought. Know nothing.

At the King's castle, the rugged walls of the Hindu Kush present themselves. It is colder, the lawns are long frozen, and a blanket is spread for the feast. Knowing no thing, there is a discourse in Pashto—words without meaning, totally understood. The Hindu Kush dancing, the Koan now seasoned. Back at the beginning, all doubt erased.

###

Going...

To the countryside

Hindu Kush inviting

Chai with toothless smiles

Inner season waiting

Coming...

What thought, what knowing

Framed by intellect

How could $2+2=5$

Back to Kindergarten...

Chapter 7

A BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Though the folding screen is broken, the frame
is still there.

—Zen Master Joshu

April in Benares. Paradise. Heat has returned to the Ganga plain and the holiest of holy cities. The Maha Kumbh Mela in Allahabad is but a remnant of the imagination. From it, a million sadhus, saints, fakirs, yogis, mendicants of every variety, and a few thousand tourists and travelers arrive in Benares, adding to the color of the holy city.

The two thousand Ganga temples are vibrant with the usual chanting and music, as is the bustle of half a million people jamming narrow lanes of the Olde City with no traffic signals or signs—a rhythm thousands of years in the making. This is where one can be cremated on a cord of wood and go directly to Swarga, the Hindu heaven, all sins expunged. Listen to the celebrants on this last parade: “Ram Nam Satya Hai.”

This is a mystical zone seeming to be of this world, or is it? Knowing all the sutras and shastras will not gain you entrance, but sitting quietly next to the river for a month or so could, as did the Buddha. Is it worth it with its privations and hardships?

There is discomfort, odors new to the nose, and psychologies unknown in this world. It is foreign, unless you are not. In the moment—out of yourself, no longer a foreigner—of it, in it, in a movie unlike any other. Each day is your stage, and you create the set. Along for the ride, there is expansion. Resist, and the curtain never rises. The choice? April in Benares—sunrise, heat; repose, evening; night, quiet.

Early morning on the river, music rouses the soul, the sacred shenai carrying for miles up and down the river for all who would absorb the call. The new schedule: 3 a.m.: rise, meditate. 5 a.m.: chai is ready. Bathe, do ritual ablutions, and take the obligatory drink of the sacred river water. 7 a.m.: air-conditioned tour buses arrive, along with lepers terrifying the tourists for a few rupees. By 9 a.m., hardly anyone is on the street, until sundown. The city's million plus inhabitants know well the average daytime temperature of 122 degrees and the accompanying hot wind fatal to lungs and life.

At sundown, life again blooms. Kerosene lamps illuminate clouds of smoke and dust, vendors shout

their wares, and a sea of humanity surges forth. It is time for a stroll. Music is in the air, and occasional ashrams line the way, offering up sounds of harmoniums and sadhus chanting odes to whichever gods are listening.

This is a feast of eye and ear for those present and an offering to the other six billion inhabitants searching for meaning. This is a stroll through the warrens of The Olde City, a grid of three-and four-story buildings converging along crooked lanes six to twelve feet wide and carrying commerce of a half million people—cows, goats, pigs, lepers, beggars, and an occasional tourist. It is both here...and there.

Here...the chaos is peaceful and has been so for thousands of years. The circus is flowing without resistance—in it and of it—cruising at a constant half mile per hour, the only interruption an odd moped trying to use this as a highway. This is a pre-Monsoon casual meander, a moving circus. It teaches; you experience. You learn; it remains the same.

And there...is another dimension. Announced with a roar of the crowd, air tenses, and bodies flee when there is nowhere to. What's happening? An instant answer—wham! Jagadeesh receives a powerful shock from behind. Time stops. Is this Dreamtime? There is a momentary silence and gravity is released—a feeling of flying in slow motion.

There is a slight sense of air rushing by. No time for fear of flying, being in flight already!

There is a new perspective, a surreal photo-like quality, and a new reality—the embrace of a building twenty feet beyond, landing flat, sliding down with eager hands of help offered, but, no pain, just distant thunder. A Brahma bull is stampeded as a joke to watch people react. All good fun, and soon enough, back to normal—like a Fellini movie.

###

Airborne from 6 to 12 O'clock

Gravity allowing flight

Feelings suspended

Landing site unselected

The flight another's joke

The lane safe again

Dust yellow light at sunset

Om drifting in the air

Incense flowing in the lanes

Celebration of life, still

Time for chai at Chai Baba's...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the Midwest, Jim Bowne was rebellious at an early age. At eight years old, a grandfather taught him how to quietly observe nature. By junior high, the love of nature took precedence over going to school. In high school, as much as one-half year was skipped. By then, bowling had been taken up and mastered quickly. Once, after a two-week absence, a teacher who had seen scores printed in the local paper commented, "You must have been very sick, but your bowling scores were great!" The same teacher, being sports-minded, was directly responsible for the author being able to graduate.

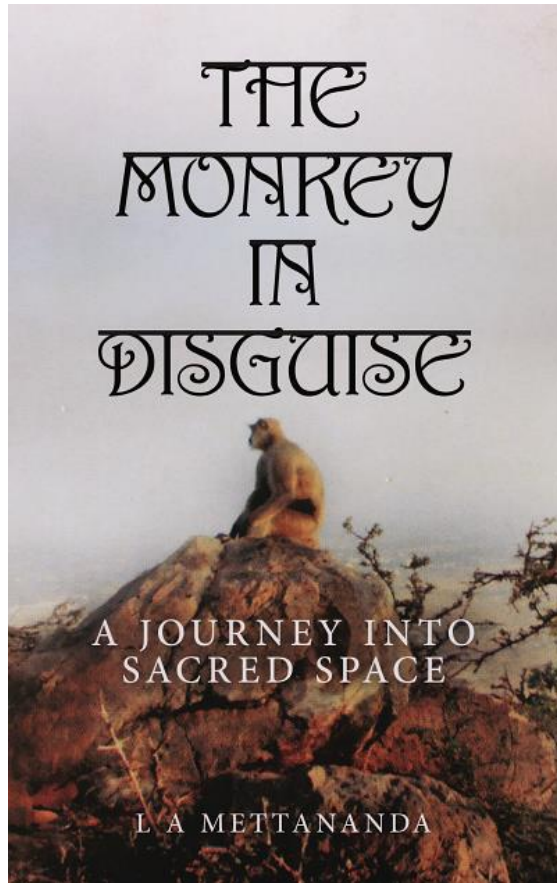
It was the time of California Dreaming, and Route 66 was famous. Traveling to L.A. after graduation opened the eyes to how different the West Coast is from the Midwest. Eventually, there was the realization that a college degree was important. And besides, enrolling in college avoided being drafted into the Vietnam War. Upon graduating, of course the draft board came knocking for recruits for their war. The author felt otherwise, and professed being a Conscientious Objector. The government did not agree, and a legal battle ensued, finally ending with

the government getting caught breaking their own law! The stress of that period led to the psychedelic revolution and the author adopting a spiritual lifestyle. An interest in aboriginal wisdom resulted in travel to Mexico.

Back in L.A., a major earthquake shook things up. Its power demonstrated that the Great Mystery is way beyond our all-knowing minds. In the early morning hours a few years later, a telepathic message came to the author instructing that it was time to visit India. This led to a seven-year journey and monkhood.

Once back in the U.S.A, another seven years was spent connected to a Sufi ashram on the East Coast. When the teacher passed away, the West Coast called once more. This time it was Oregon, where nature was prominent. The author constructed a canvas Dome, living off grid for twelve years on Mt. Ashland. Focus was on meditation, writing, being involved in environmental activism, and creating Zen gardens.

He now resides in the Joshua Tree area of the Southern California Mojave Desert along with Georgia, the cat.



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