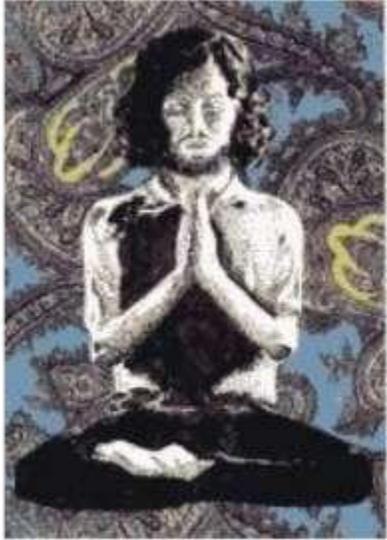


My Spiritual Journey

"Monumental Moments"

from [In Search of the True Light](#) Part 3



A portrait of Mike Shreve painted by one of his Yoga students in the Fall of 1970

Monumental moments are significant turning points in our lives. For the remainder of our days we can look back to these ‘moments’—decisions, events, experiences—and feel their worth and their warmth all over again. It’s as if a monument is erected in our souls that we can visit to have our vision and zeal renewed.

According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama encountered such a ‘monumental moment’ around the age of twenty-nine. Modern thinkers might even term it a ‘personal paradigm shift’ (a private transformation in life-style and beliefs that effected a societal change). Though sheltered all his life within the confines of a royal palace, he dared to venture into the ‘outside world.’ According to legend, it was then that Siddhartha viewed what has since been titled the "Four Sights"—a sick man, an old man, a corpse and an ascetic.

No longer could he remain spiritually asleep on a bed of princely ease. Having witnessed the suffering that abounds in this world, he was shaken, jarred from a self-serving mentality. The resulting desperation to find answers became, as author William Burrough’s puts it, "the raw material of drastic change."

The palace protégé made a radically unorthodox decision. Walking away from the opulent surroundings to which he had grown accustomed, he turned instead down the narrow path of renunciation. Hoping to transcend the natural world, he subjected himself to intense ascetic disciplines. Then after a number of years, while meditating under the Bodhi tree, he claimed to receive an experience of Ultimate Reality. At that point, according to those who subscribe to his philosophy, he became the "Buddha," the "Awakened One," the "Enlightened One."

Even if we do not subscribe to Buddha’s conclusions, most of us can definitely relate to him—for we can isolate certain heart-touching incidents as defining moments in our lives. A near-death experience in my freshman year of college proved to be a ‘pivotal point’ for me.

That almost-tragic night, I had the distinct impression that my soul was actually leaving my body and passing into a very frightening and dark void. I felt totally unprepared. I have heard it said

that those who desire to die well, must first learn to live well. I certainly had not been living well, so I wasn't ready to die well either.

There was nothing pleasant about my encounter with this ever-present stalker of the human race. Yet it proved to be extremely beneficial. What looked like nothing more than a negative experience became a positive one, because I emerged with a new set of values. My former life was no longer attractive or fulfilling to me. Quite the contrary, it seemed overwhelmingly senseless, selfish and vain. The pursuit of pleasure left my heart empty. Temporal goals that had been all-consuming seemed frustratingly unimportant.

Earn a college degree? Pursue a career? Become financially secure? For what—if ultimately a grave was waiting somewhere in my future? That inward voice kept probing and prodding with admonitions similar to the one given to Horatio, in the Shakespearean play, "Hamlet": "*There are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*"

Like a blind man I stumbled through the darkness, grasping for something of substance. I was desperate to go beyond my self-imposed boundaries and desperate for lasting answers. Once again, this sense of desperateness became "the raw material of drastic change."

Religion took on a renewed importance. I was raised a Roman Catholic. Until my early teens I was very devoted, but the idea that Christianity was the only way to God, to the exclusion of all other religions, just seemed too narrow-minded, too unreasonable. Besides, I decided I could no longer embrace something just because it was part of my cultural or family 'belief system.' I purposed to 'wipe the slate clean' and start from a pure and unbiased beginning point.

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." I resolved that beliefs left unexamined might not be worth much either...at least, to me personally. Intending to explore various religions of the world with an open mind, I set out on a quest for "True Light." Even though I recognized I was studying the revelations, theories and opinions of others, my primary goal was to experience God for myself. I had faith that something somewhere would prove to be my connection with Ultimate Reality.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's words well described my mindset at that time:

*Earth's crammed with heaven;
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

'Blackberries' held no interest for me any longer. I was willing to 'take off my shoes' and look at things differently. I was definitely searching for my 'burning bush.' All of this was definitely progress in the right direction. Little did I anticipate the unique turns my life would take before reaching this goal. The first main milestone in the road was...

An Encounter With Far Eastern Religions

I began reading a lot of literature on Far Eastern religions and related subjects. The new phraseology filled up my mind: yoga, astral projection, mantras, chakras, the third eye, Nirvana, God-consciousness—all of these things sounded very intriguing and appealing.

Then in the fall of 1969 I went to hear Yogi Bajan: a guru from India who claimed he came to North America to help the ‘flower child,’ ‘peace’ generation find their way spiritually. He taught us about yoga (a word literally meaning ‘to be yoked,’ the inference being that the goal of the devotee is to be ‘yoked with God.’) He explained that this ‘union’ could be achieved through various means, especially prolonged meditation. With his full beard, long black hair and intense dark eyes, this teacher of Far Eastern mysticism was somewhat imposing and quite convincing.

However, it was much more than the mystique surrounding this tall, muscular, turban-clad Sikh that attracted me. It was more than the evident passion he displayed concerning his beliefs. It was more than just the stimulus of a new approach to spirituality. It was the promise that I could actually experience God and penetrate the supernatural realm for myself. This drew me to Yogi Bajan’s words and to the system of yogic discipline he was propagating (Kundalini Yoga, also called the ‘yoga of awareness’).

Attaining my ‘higher Self’ soon became the primary focus of my day-to-day existence. In between and after college classes, I used every available hour to pursue the goal of ‘reaching enlightenment.’

The Hindu Bhakti poet, Surdas, warned, "Without devotion to God, you will make yourself into a stale crumb to be eaten by the tiger of Time." Appalled at the thought of becoming a ‘stale crumb,’ the following spring, I made the decision to use my time more wisely. Along with another college friend, I quit school to ‘escape the jaws of the tiger.’

Packing up my belongings, I left the campus of Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida, to help start an ashram in Daytona Beach (a commune where yoga devotees live together to more effectively practice their religious disciplines). Every day involved hours of meditation and Mantra Yoga (the chanting of certain Hindu words and phrases, called mantras, designed to carry a person to higher levels of consciousness). We also set aside time for the study of Hatha Yoga. This centered on physical exercises (*asanas*) and breathing exercises (*pranayama*), both of which were aimed toward opening up something called *chakras* (supposed spiritual centers of energy in the body).

Our daily routine also included what could be termed Jnana Yoga (the study of sacred texts and other religious writings). Central to our attention were the Bhagavad-Gita, the Vedas (ancient Hindu Scriptures) and the writings of mystics and teachers like Edgar Cayce, Helena Blavatsky and Yogananda. Then, of course, there was participation in yoga classes several nights a week. Every waking hour and every activity, even bathing and eating meals, was controlled by a prearranged discipline. We were motivated by the supreme goal of all ashram devotees—our souls (*atman*) blending into oneness with the Oversoul (*Brahman*). We were totally committed to the process.

Peculiar things began happening to me: a sense of peace and detachment from the world, what seemed to be occasional out-of-body excursions into some kind of higher realm, vivid spiritual dreams. The suffocating control of the natural realm seemed to be easing its grip. A kind of spiritual adrenaline surged through me daily—the prospect that I was wrenching myself free from what my teachers called *maya*, the illusion of this present world. I felt encouraged that transcendent love would prevail for me—that I, in an Adam-like sense, would one day awake out of spiritual sleep to find myself gazing into the face of my Maker. What could be better?

So I pursued. I followed hard after God, until every waking moment was pulsating with the heartbeat of a sacred quest. Nothing can express the cry of my heart at that time better than the following quote from the "Sayings of Shri Ramakrishna":

If you fill an earthen vessel with water and set it apart upon a shelf, the water in it will dry up in a few days; but if you place the same vessel immersed in water, it will remain filled as long as it is kept there. Even so is the case of your love for the Lord God...if you keep your heart immersed always in the ocean of divine love, your heart is sure to remain ever full to overflowing with the water of the divine love."¹

"*Full to overflowing*"...To be *full*: that spoke of my own spiritual needs being met. With every passing hour, I yearned for such a state of intimate communion with God. But to *overflow*: that spoke of satisfying the thirst of others for spiritual truth. Though my chief, initial desire was to be *full* myself, day by day I began sensing even greater concern for the parched state of others. I needed to *overflow*. I concluded that such an unselfish state of existence was, and will always be—the high calling. I could no longer ignore the plight of a human race draped in spiritual ignorance. So after conferring with those in leadership, I left the ashram to go to another city and start teaching classes myself.

Feeling strongly compelled, I moved to the thriving city of Tampa, Florida. Four universities in that area (the University of South Florida, the University of Tampa, Florida Presbyterian and New College) opened their doors, allowing me to use their facilities for extra-curricular classes. Several hundred students began attending. It was fulfilling. Touching other hearts with my 'touched heart,' changing other lives with my changed life—this was the continuation of a cycle, the evolution of true spirituality. Desiring to devote themselves more completely, a number of my students requested that I rent a suitable facility and form a small ashram. Gladly, I complied.

One night, during that time, I experienced what some have termed 'white light.' I had the distinct impression that my soul exited my body and was drawn into a very intense and timeless radiance. Though now I have a different interpretation of what really happened to me, at the time, I felt I was passing into the highest state of meditation. More assured than ever that I was truly on my 'path,' I intensified my efforts.

Then it happened! Very abruptly...very unexpectedly...a divine appointment interrupted what had become a predictable pattern of life. I wasn't even seeking for a new direction, but God knew my heart. He knew my love for him and my sincerity of purpose. So he intervened for me by orchestrating some very significant events that brought about...

A Dramatic Change

Several key happenings took place within a few weeks that caused the most important 'turning point' in my life. First, the Tampa Tribune newspaper published a half-page interview with me. The reporter questioned me concerning my beliefs as a teacher of Kundalini Yoga and reported all that I was doing in the Tampa area. I was thankful for the exposure, certain that this free publicity would increase the attendance in my classes.

Little did I know that it would also alert a local Christian prayer group to begin praying for me.

A member of the prayer group cut the article out of the paper, pinned it to their prayer board and assigned someone to fast and pray for me every day until my conversion took place. During this same period, I received a letter from my college friend who left school at the same time I did, for the same reason. The content of Larry's letter was quite a surprise. It described an abrupt change that had just taken place in his life. Though he had been devoted to Far Eastern religions and certain yoga disciplines, something had radically transformed his whole approach to the things of God. Larry explained how he had received a blessed, supernatural experience with Jesus called being "born again."

Larry also claimed this experience was different than any experience acquired through yoga and that it validated Jesus' claim of being the only way to salvation. Larry's words were emphatic, "Mike, you'll never find ultimate peace through yoga and meditation. You have to go through the cross. You have to be born again. Jesus is the way to eternal life."



I wrote my college comrade back, explaining how happy I was that he had found 'the path of Christianity' to be right for him. However, I stated unequivocally that the claims of Christianity were too exclusive for me. My beliefs encompassed all the religions of the world. All were different 'paths' to the same God: this was my firm conviction. Strangely, though, I could not get

Larry's letter off of my mind. His words kept echoing inside of me, even though their logic escaped me.

After several weeks, I decided I needed to deal with this issue. Dismissing Christianity without fully exploring its claims would be unfair—unfair to me and unfair to the One who claimed to be the Savior of the world. I realized I had never really given Jesus an opportunity to prove himself. So I concluded, "If he really was who he claimed to be, and if I don't test his teachings, I might miss the very thing I've been searching for... Besides, if Jesus allowed himself to be crucified for the salvation of the human race, I owe it to him to at least open my heart to the possibility of his claims being true." So one morning, though it involved an inward struggle, instead of following my usual yoga routine, I decided to...

Dedicate One Day To The Lord Jesus Christ!

I got up, as usual, about 3:15 A.M. That was our normal time of rising in the ashram. Beginning at 3:30, we would spend about an hour doing various postures and breathing exercises. Then from 4:30 to 6:30 we would sit cross-legged and motionless, in what is called the 'lotus position,' doing various kinds of meditation. Usually we practiced Mantra Yoga. That pivotal morning, though, I decided to break away from the ordinary.

Purposefully, I went into a room by myself and sat down. Though it seemed spiritually incorrect, I prayerfully dedicated the entire day to this One Larry claimed was the only "Mediator between God and men." (*1 Timothy 2:5*) Several times I confessed, "Lord Jesus, I commit this day to you. I believe, if you are real and if you are the Savior of the world, you will show me today." Then I began reading the Bible, spending most of my time immersed in the Gospel of John and the book of the Revelation. I was especially stirred by this latter book, with its powerful, prophetic imagery, especially those verses foretelling that final conflict between the forces of good and evil at a battleground in Israel called Armageddon (the valley of Megiddo).

As I read, I kept praying. Even though I was fully expecting some kind of powerful, supernatural visitation (a vision, an audible voice) initially, it didn't happen that way. For about ten hours that day I persisted, reading the Bible and seeking after the Lord Jesus. Then, right when I was about to give up and dismiss the claims of Christ, God intervened...and I arrived at my...

Moment Of Destiny!

Kent Sullivan was a senior at the University of South Florida. He was an accomplished student, but his educational pursuits had not brought him the answers to life or the peace of mind he desired. A few months before, he had been studying Far Eastern mysticism. Specifically, he was following the teachings of Yogananda, a well-known Indian guru who authored a popular book called, *The Autobiography of a Yogi*. Abruptly, though, Kent had switched from Kriya Yoga to Christianity.

Though I had never met Kent personally, I was well aware of his unexpected 'conversion.' It was the 'talk of the town' among those involved in yoga and meditation. All of us were wondering,

"How could he do it? He was recognized as one of the most advanced students of yoga in the Tampa area. How could he get involved with people who teach that Jesus is the only path to salvation?" Not only were we stunned over Kent's 'departure from the faith,' our assessment was that he had opted for a lesser path. I mused, "How could anyone who understands the concept of 'all religions being one' ever depart from it? What changed his mind?" Of course, as I pondered these things, I had no idea that....

Kent belonged to the very prayer group that was praying for me.

That divinely appointed day Kent decided to wash his dirty clothes. He had a free hour between classes. It was a perfect time to take care of a boring, but necessary task. With an armful of clothes up to his chin, he got about halfway through the door of the laundromat, when the Spirit of God stopped him. He heard that still, small voice in his spirit say, "Don't go in there. I have something else for you to do. Get back in the van and drive where I lead you." It all seemed impractical and illogical. Besides, being a new Christian, Kent was not used to having his plans interrupted by the Holy Spirit. He submitted to God's design, though, thinking it quite peculiar that for some reason God did not want him to wash his laundry. Of course, he had no idea that about two miles away...

The yoga teacher who had been the object of his prayers for several weeks was hitchhiking, trying to catch a ride to the University of South Florida.

Even though I had spent the day focusing on the claims of Christianity, I was on my way that afternoon to conduct one of my yoga classes. (Because I had renounced ownership of all unnecessary material possessions, I usually had to walk or hitchhike everywhere.) While standing on the side of the road, I was still praying that if Jesus was 'the Way,' he would somehow reveal himself.

As Kent drove, the Spirit of God impressed him to make several definite turns, eventually leading him down a road directly behind Busch Gardens. He was still wondering why he was doing all of this when he noticed a unique-looking, young man 'thumbing' for a ride. With long, curly, brown hair, a long beard and loose-fitting Indian-style clothing, I definitely looked the part of a Western devotee to Far Eastern religions. Kent never picked up hitchhikers, but felt strangely 'led' to pull over. As I opened the door and stepped in the van, my heart started racing in my chest, because...

Taped to the ceiling of Kent's van was a large picture of Jesus.

I knew this was no mere coincidence; I knew this was my answer. My mind and heart felt charged with anticipation. After a few minutes of silence, Kent blurted out, "Friend, can I ask you a question?" Without hesitation, I responded, "Yes!" He immediately asked, "Have you ever experienced Jesus coming into your heart?" I quickly answered, "No, but when can I? I've been praying about the experience all day long."

Kent's face broke into a look of surprise. He certainly did not expect me to respond so quickly. He offered, "You can come to our prayer meeting tonight." I replied, "I don't want to wait for a

prayer meeting. I've been praying all day. If this is a valid approach to God, I want to experience Jesus right now." Thrilled over my eagerness, Kent pulled out of the traffic into the first parking lot he could find. After turning the engine off, he invited me to sit with him on the floor of the van. Pulling the curtains behind the front seats so we would have privacy, he began carefully explaining the way of salvation. Then, right when I was on the verge of embracing the Christian approach to salvation, my own intellect became....

A Very Difficult Stumbling Block!

A compelling thought gripped my mind. If I was going to be sincere during this time of prayer, I had to first deal with some disturbing doctrinal issues. One by one, I brought up traditional biblical concepts that were very perplexing to me. With each question or comment Kent would calmly reassure me with the words, "Don't worry about that. JUST TRY JESUS!" As I pinpointed certain Far Eastern beliefs I felt I could never give up, Kent kept emphasizing, "Don't concern yourself with those things, JUST TRY JESUS!"

Being a former student of yoga himself, Kent understood my apprehension. He could relate to the protectiveness I felt toward my belief system. He showed tremendous wisdom. He knew that if we got involved in some deep discussion over doctrine, I might turn my heart away from the experience of Jesus altogether. So he kept emphasizing the essential thing. Repeating Jesus' words, he explained, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (*John 3:3 KJV*)

Kent understood something I am very convinced of now. It takes a spiritual rebirth before anyone can *see* or comprehend the mysteries of God's kingdom. Because Jesus is "the truth," once he comes into a person's heart, he sets in motion a process of leading that person, by the Holy Spirit, into all truth. (*See John 14:6.*) So the most important thing is for seekers to first experience the reality of Jesus' personal presence. Then they can far more easily sort out all the related truths that surround this central theme of true Christianity.

Kent finally persuaded me. His logic was strong enough to nudge me into the unknown. Besides, I was so hungry to know God; temporarily setting my intellect aside wasn't too much to ask. Just repeating a single petition seemed much too simple—but again, I was willing to try. We bowed our heads and this newfound friend led me in a prayer for salvation:

"Lord Jesus, come into my heart. Wash me in your blood. Forgive me of my sins. Give me eternal life. Fill me with your presence and your love. I acknowledge that you died for the sins of the world and that you arose from the dead. I accept you now as Lord of my life."

I felt a warm sensation in the deepest part of my heart. Something different was taking place, much different than anything I had ever experienced. As a child I attended mass regularly at various Catholic churches. I served for years as an altar boy and attended parochial school. The nuns and priests who influenced me during that formative stage of my life inspired me with their humility, sincerity and commitment. But still, in all those years—filled with meaningful Christian traditions and ceremonies—I had never received such a real encounter with God.

Paul, the apostle, called this experience "the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit." (*Titus 3:5*) Though I still had many questions stirring in my heart, the inner 'knowing' that I had finally been restored to a right relationship with God filled me up. I was confident that if I died, I would spend eternity in heaven. The indescribable peace of God settled like fresh dew on my soul. I was changed...and I knew it.

Vietnamese Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh, writes, "If we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God, not as a concept, but as a living reality."² This was definitely my mindset as a yoga teacher and I still believe it to this day. However, I now understand that experiencing something 'supernatural' may or may not indicate an actual experience of God. I sincerely *thought* (just as Thich Nhat Hanh surely must) that I was experiencing the "living reality" of the Holy Spirit during my yogic disciplines, but after being born again, I viewed this experiential knowledge from a whole new perspective.

For several days following this life-changing experience, I announced to all my students that I had finally encountered this "living reality." I confessed that I had been wrong in my previous assessment of Ultimate Reality, that I never encountered the true Spirit of God until I went through Jesus, and that consequently, all of my yoga classes would be cancelled. Though such an abrupt change was shocking to my students, many trusted my newfound insights and enthusiastically accepted Jesus as Lord of their lives.

As always, my passion was to share my experience with others, which I did very vigorously. Having struggled so hard to find my Creator, once I found him, it was imperative to declare this essential revelation to every openhearted person I met. I closed the ashram and moved to a different location. Many hours were spent studying the Bible and praying. It was another pivotal point for me personally, a season of radical transition, a very important time of learning to discern the difference between incorrect and correct doctrine. As Plato once said, "God is truth and light his shadow." Because the God of heaven was finally overshadowing me with his personal and gracious influence, the light of truth began to shine more and more with every passing day.





In India, large crowds gather to hear the biblical point of view (such as the meetings pictured here--meetings I conducted in Sivikasi and Bangalore). Hindu people tend to be very gentle, very loving and very hungry for spiritual realities. Many come to the Lord Jesus, especially when they realize that I once embraced a worldview very similar to theirs.

1 *The World's Great Religions* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1957) p. 38.

2 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York, New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) p. xvi.