

Part 4: The Walk, the Prayer and the Fire

All good things come to an end, but they shouldn't end without an ending worth remembering. The last full day of the LUXYOGA Resolution Retreat began with a silent class followed by a session of posture tips and hip-opener exercises. Silent classes include no dialogue except for cues from the instructor to change the posture. It's designed to give practitioners a deeper meditation in their practice and also allows the instructor to practice. There can be some tendencies for the mind to wander without the instructor cues, making silent classes difficult in some ways. My intention for the class was to be disciplined enough to keep my focus and keep away any negative thoughts or fears in my practice.



No breakfast for me that morning, but I managed to spend a few minutes looking at the sun over Nice. The silent class, though meditative, had a rigorous pace to it with the class being shorter because there was little dialogue. The climax of the class came at ustrasana, also known as camel posture, the deepest backward bend of the Bikram series. It's a very intense posture because it opens up the heart and central nervous system, and it's very common to have uncomfortable, weird feelings. The class did five sets of ustrasana, which for me was unheard of. I think everyone was surprised Ben had us doing so many, but I think it was for us to open up our spine and chest for the rest of the day. After the fifth and final set, I was tired, but my heart was open. There

were no other five-set postures like ustrasana, but we did spend time after class working on utkatasana, which is also known as awkward pose. That posture builds leg and arm strength, and is part of the warm-up of the Bikram series.

Once the silent class and posture clinic was over, we had lunch, which featured roasted tomatoes and potatoes, eggs, lentils, turnips and a salad of potato, apple and spinach salad. The next part of the day was going to be a nature walk in the Alps of South of France before our final class of the retreat. It was a short retreat, but there was a lot for me to process physically, mentally and emotionally. I was looking forward to the afternoon walk to release some of



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my revelations to Mother Earth, which included everything from arriving to France to the new approach I was taking in my practice.

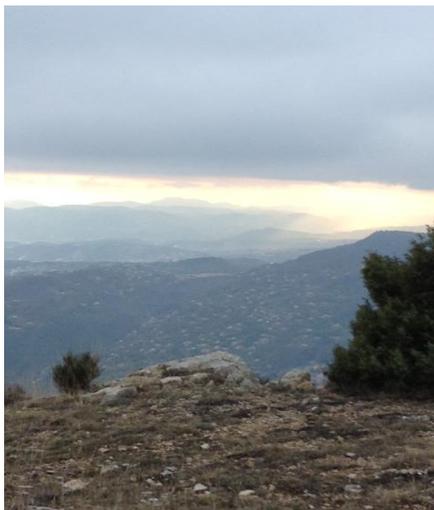


It was a chilly, cloudy afternoon when we made the walk. There was a hint of sun I could see over Nice in the distance, but the elevation was so high the sunlight was barely noticeable. Ben told us we'd be making the walk in silence and would stay in silence until the last class of the retreat. He was going to lead us to a place on the walk where we could look over the Alps and see a view of small towns and the ocean. Along the way I took pictures of the nature I saw, including mud puddles, barren trees, fields and low-set clouds. The silence was as quiet as I'd ever experienced, like the silence snowfall brings. My mind was shutoff, absorbing the silence that filled my body, and I could only think about what I was seeing around me.

We got to the peak Ben guided us to where we could see the ocean, more mountains and towns far below. The sun was more visible now, and so I fixated my thought over its beams through the clouds. Everyone else in the group was dispersed in their own space at the peak. Some were sitting on rocks looking over the cliff; another found a tree and the rest stood. Ben wanted us to have our own meditative space to connect with nature, ourselves or whatever connection we needed. I had nothing to ask for in the silence or anything else to contemplate. All I could do was give gratitude for how far I'd come to be at this retreat, the people I'd met and the lessons



I'd learned. I was thankful for being in the nature of peace, for being in one of the most beautiful places in the world and being who I am.



The walk in its entirety lasted about 90 minutes, though it seemed much longer with the silence. The group came back to the villa in silence as Ben instructed, and no one spoke until the last class of the retreat. This was it, the last class, the end. I expected the class to be the most intense, and maybe even the most emotional. I've had my share of tears and crying in yoga classes. I had no reason to think the last class would be any different.

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My intention for the last class was to express my gratitude as I did on the nature walk. I felt strong going into the class, which I think was in part due to the solitude from earlier in the day. The group itself seemed as inspired as it had ever been. We were going in and out of postures as one, and the energy helped me sustain postures, even when I was tempted at times to come out. When we got to ustrasana again, Ben gave us a special instruction for the posture. He told us to say a prayer for ourselves for the first set. Ustrasana, as I would learn, is when our hearts are most open to the world and the universe, and it's in this posture which we are most able to express ourselves to a higher power in whatever way.



My prayer was for my finances and way of life to be taken of as I embarked on a new chapter doing what I loved: writing and teaching yoga. As I said the prayer I was in a place of ease that I'd never been. The prayer and intention seemed to be taking my mind off whatever tension I may have experienced. It was a wonderful feeling. Coming out of the first set, I was a bit tearful as well, knowing I deserved what I asked for, but being thankful my prayer was received. In the second set, Ben had us say a prayer for someone else. I chose the beneficiary to be my mom and that she would be well in her life. Again, I felt so much at ease in the posture, I probably could've done an extra three sets of ustrasana as the class did in the silent class.

This was the first time I'd ever understood ustrasana in the way of opening up the heart, and it was from that point forward when I practiced I prayed in the posture. After ustrasana we finished class the same as before. In the final savasana more tears came up as I thought about being in the LUXYOGA room for the last time. When I offered a final internal gratitude I left the room to get ready for dinner. The last class of the retreat changed how I felt about my yoga practice for good. My practice was really a dedication in some way to myself or another person. It's a gift I give that reflects my life outside of the yoga room. Whatever I give, I receive, and it comes from the heart.

In the evening the villa was beautifully lit by candles in the hallways and the dinner table. For our last meal we had roasted carrots with goat cheese, a cheese plate with assorted French cheeses, baked duck with brussel sprouts and a chocolate flourless cake for dessert. It was my favorite meal of the night. It was only my second time ever



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having duck, and it tasted wonderfully with the brussel sprouts. The cake was incredibly rich and satisfying to end the meal. After conversations of birthdays and astrology, Ben had one last activity to end the retreat.



Ben told us to get our papers where we wrote our destructive habits and good qualities on the first day of the retreat and to stand around the fire in the villa den. At first the group was wondering if we'd have to share what we wrote, which wasn't appealing to most of us, but Ben had a different idea. As we stood around the fire he told us our papers represented both the bad habits and behaviors that could now be burned away, and at the same time, let the good qualities of our spirit burn brightly. Our instruction was to go to the fire and say our prayers we said in ustrasana, and then

place our papers in the fire. Ben had a sage he'd burned, and we were to take the fumes from the sage and place it over us with our hands as a way to cleanse and purify ourselves from what we had done.

One of the guests began to tear up, and I could sense there was a lot of emotion coming from the group, even if it wasn't visible. Intentionally burning something is a profound transformational experience. It rids the old way, the old thought, so that something new may begin. The group formed a line to place our papers in the fire, and one by one we performed the ritual. It was beautifully quiet, and while I'll never know or need to know what anyone placed in the fire or had in their prayers, I'm sure with the profound energy of the retreat their intentions were fulfilled.



When it was my turn, I stood in front of the fire, thinking what I was about to do. There was a sense of "wow" within me. I couldn't believe the retreat was coming to something like this that was so profound. If there was any doubt that I needed to be at LUXYOGA, this swept it away for good. I said my prayers again for my mom and myself, then placed the paper in the fire. It couldn't have burned fast enough. It was as if the fire had been waiting to eat up my paper. I was spiritually and vocally elated, saying "Yes, finally, this is burning!" and the group laughed. I took the sage essence Ben had and showered it over me before giving gratitude to God. Then I watched the rest of the group give their prayers and place their papers in the fire.

After everyone was finished, we stood in a circle and held hands as Ben recited a mantra of goodwill. At the end of the mantra, we all joined together in saying three ohm's. Finally, we gave everyone in the group a hug with an intention of gratitude and blessings, which officially ended the retreat. It's always a

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little depressing on the last night of these retreats, but I couldn't have been happier with the ending. I felt renewed and more than ever ready to move forward with the life ahead of me, living with courage, ease and gratitude in all aspects of my life.

Final Thoughts and Remaining Pieces

Even though I had to wake up a little before 6:00 am to make my flight home, I only got about three hours of sleep talking to people from the group, saying goodbyes and writing in my journal. I learned a little more about one of the guests, Mary, who was an American living in France to pursue her career as an artist. Most of her paintings were flowers with oil colors. Mary had only been practicing Bikram Yoga for a year, and it was also her third LUXYOGA retreat. It was too bad Mary and I got to know each other on the last day of the retreat. Our rooms were next to each other, but the schedule didn't seem to render much time to talk, and I was usually one of the last people to sleep each night anyway. I'm still glad I had the time to talk to Mary, even for a short while.



My three hours of sleep were short, but just enough that I didn't feel too tired to get something to eat before Giulia, who picked me up from the airport, would drop me off. I talked to Dan for the last time about how great the retreat was and when I would hopefully return. He sent me dates for the upcoming retreats that I hope I'll be able to make this year. LUXYOGA has become an annual trip for me that I don't want to miss as long as I'm able to go.



I gave Dan a warm embrace to seal my departure from the villa. It was dark when Giulia and I left so I didn't see much of the homes in the Alps on the way to Nice, but festive blue lights were up to illuminate the small local town we drove through of Tourettes. I noticed the casino along the drive that I'd forgotten was there. Who knows if anyone was present at 6:30 am on a Sunday, but sites like this are the small things I miss about coming to the South of France. They're simple things, but simple in faraway places I don't get to visit often.

Giulia got me to the airport a little over an hour before my plane was to depart. I enjoyed her company as I did everyone else on the retreat, and if all things came into place that would allow

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me to make an extended trip to Europe, I said I'd visit her in Madrid where she's teaching Bikram. We had a warm hug and good-bye, as in see you soon, and I was back at the Nice airport to go home. This time around, all my flights were early, and the trip to Baltimore was seamless as I went from Nice to London and from London to Baltimore. I was sad and cried as expected, but moments like what I experienced were designed to make me stronger wherever I went.

I made a commitment to trust myself with love and ease in my practice, as well as when I experienced difficulty in everyday parts of my life. After all, our yoga practice is often a reflection of how we are living as a whole. If we spend time criticizing or demeaning ourselves in the yoga room, it means we have carried that with us in our everyday living. However, when we treat ourselves with love, kindness and courage from within the yoga room, it not only defeats the negativity we've bought and sold to ourselves, but it becomes a mirror of our life outside of yoga. What we take into our practice is what we take into every other aspect of our lives. So to have the fulfilling life we want, it only makes sense that we should live and practice from the heart.

