

Yoga 4 Change

A Journey to India

Yoga4Change is a journey aiming to build bridges between the East and West through the practice of yoga. The India tour was the first in a series, all of which will be aired as a documentary collection on **Netflix**.

by Christina Fernandes

Just like India itself, the Yoga4Change trip was a study in opposites. The chaos and madness of Varanasi juxtaposed with the tranquility of the Bihari country side. The death-defying bus rides that stood in stark contrast to the peaceful boat journeys on the Ganga. As much shock as delight at the various mid-rift baring outfits that illustrated the vast cultural

differences between the American visitors and their Indian hosts. But there were also deep human connections made as the Guru of a small village, taken by the group's roadside yoga practice, profusely thanked them for "bringing yoga back to India" and invited them to take part in his temple's feast. As at another village, local children came to sing and dance with the Western yogis.



"This trip was designed to be an experiment in bridge building between the East and the West through the discipline of Yoga," explains Amar Singh Kaleka, filmmaker and organizer of the trip.

Yoga4Change is planned as a series of journeys to sacred places around the world.

"This trip to India was just the beginning," says Indy Rishi Singh, laughter yogi and one of the three teachers on the tour. "Yoga4Change is an ongoing initiative to promote positive and meaningful change throughout the world while exploring modalities of yoga from around the globe."

The group of 17 who formed the Yoga4Change team are true believers in the power of Yoga. Many told stories of how yoga saved them from abusive marriages, dependence on antidepressants, post traumatic stress syndrome and other mental and physical ailments. It was clear that everyone on the trip was seeking something – a deeper meaning to their existence, a spiritual connection, a source of hope and strength.

It was a brave step for most of them, since none except for one of the teachers had ever been to India and for some it was only the second time they had even left their home country. In the face

of this, the first few days in India were a serious culture shock for most, as they dealt with traffic chaos, rat and bug encounters, and intense overcrowding in many places. Some came close to panic attacks and probably questioned their decision to ever come to India. But as the days went on, the group settled into their surroundings and each other, which enabled them to appreciate their experiences and connect with Mother India.

"Yoga4Change is the quintessential testing ground for experiential learning," explains Indy. "I was honored to share my love of yoga, meditation and wellbeing with everyone who joined the Yoga4Change family."

The Yoga4Change tour was a seemingly impossible succession of deeply emotional and profoundly moving experiences. The American yogis lit candles in the dark and released them, along with thousands more, to float down the Ganga at the Arti ceremony in Varanasi. They watched the sun rise above pilgrims bathing in the sacred waters of the same river. They danced in a passing wedding parade. Listened to the chanting of Thai pilgrims at Vulture's Peak, monks at the Mahabodhi Temple and school children underneath the sacred Mahabodhi Tree. Met and laughed with little Vedic

monks at a school for orphaned and impoverished boys. Practiced yoga at some of the most historic and holy sites in India. Walked in the footsteps of the Buddha.

"What an honor to practice, dance, pray, play, meditate and celebrate life alongside every single one of the beautiful spirits I connected with during this journey to India," said Amie Basky, another teacher on the trip.

Not all experiences were blissful, however. There were also lessons in communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims as angry security guards at the Taj Mahal screamed "No yoga!" at anyone who so much as twisted their fingers into a mudra. The squalid conditions surrounding the splendour of many of India's historical sites. Tensions within the group as approaches to yoga and aspirations for the trip clashed. And finally, the dreaded Delhi belly, which struck down several participants just as they were readying to board various planes and trains home or to onward destinations.

Most of all, Yoga4Change illustrated the dichotomy in modern Yoga. It highlighted the vast differences in personal interpretations of yoga doctrine as well as the way yoga is viewed in India, where it originated, versus the West, where it has caught on like wildfire. In the process of yoga's spreading around the world, it has taken on various new shapes and many question how much of its true, original essence actually remains. Is it often merely a form of gymnastics or acrobatics now? Do those seeking to understand and mend their own lives and spirituality merely bend and twist-an

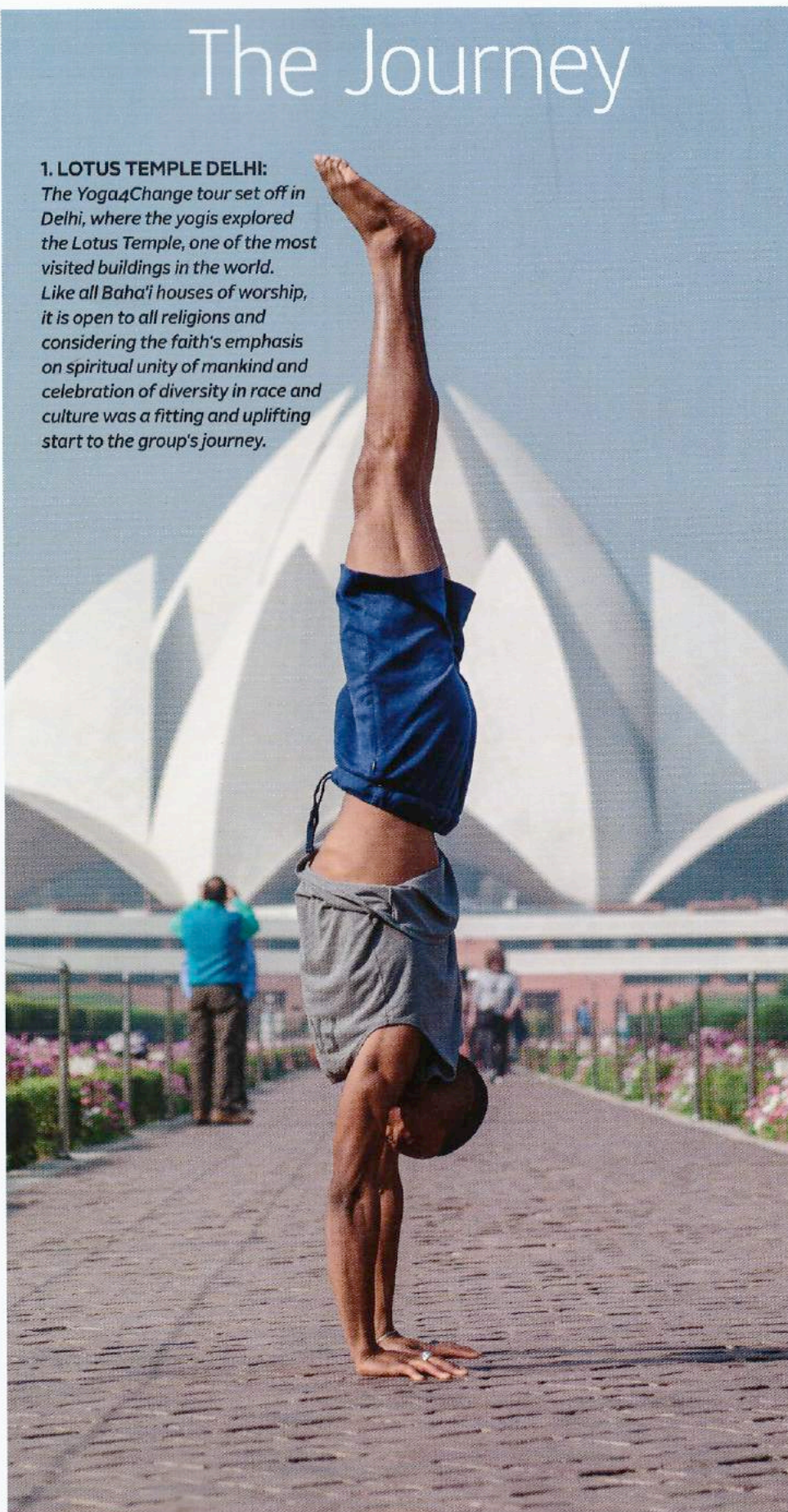
age-old practice to fit their own requirements? Or do Sage Patanjali's words still carry meaning and continue to guide even modern, western yogis? Answers to these questions, despite much lively discussion among the Yoga4Change group, remain elusive. Nevertheless, the American yogis are committed to continuing their quest of forging connections with people around the world through the practice of yoga.

"For some this trip was a life changing moment," reflects Kaleka. "For others, it became a mission to help orphans who are studying the hardest Vedic meditations. And for others, it was a chance to touch the footsteps of the Shakyamuni Buddha, one of the original Yogis. In the end, this was a groundbreaking hobby excursion. We were able to glean amazing material and media, ancient wisdom, and a sense of family between each other." *

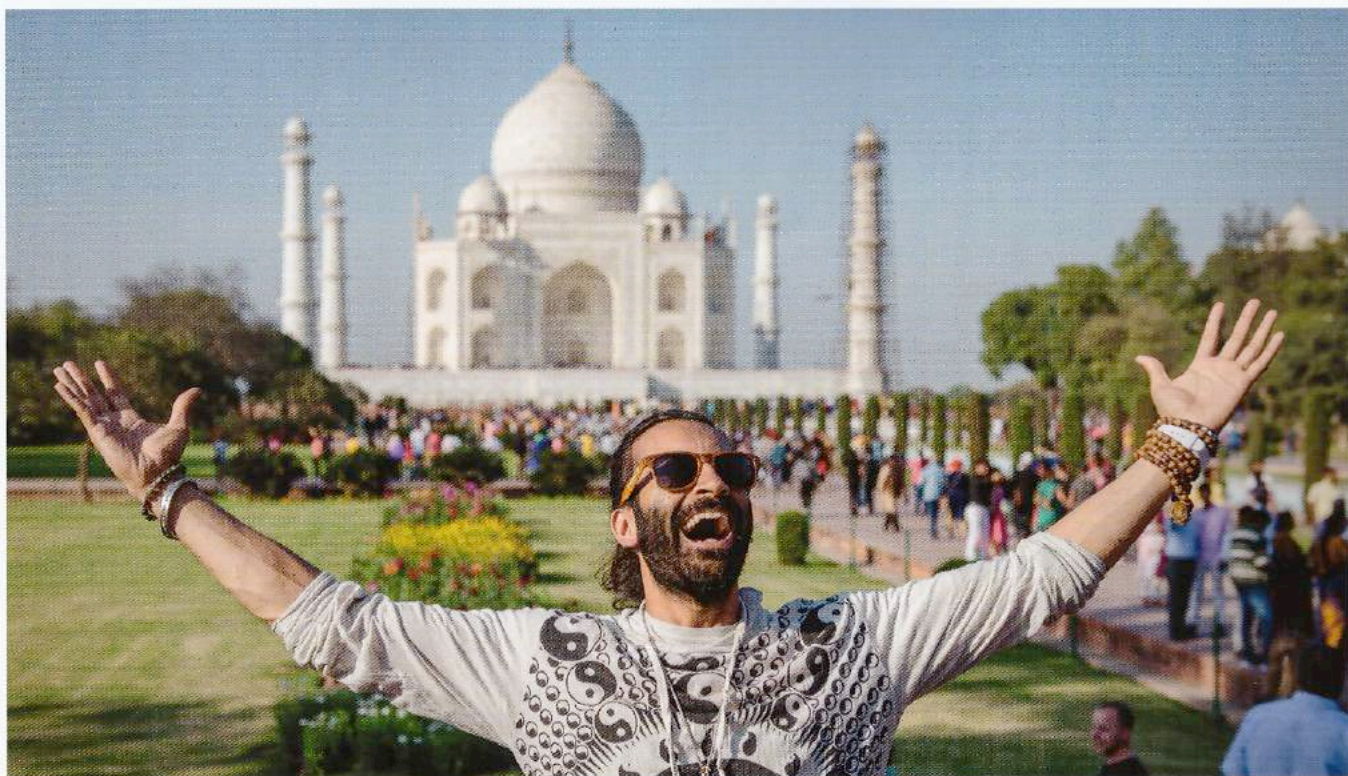
The Journey

1. LOTUS TEMPLE DELHI:

The Yoga4Change tour set off in Delhi, where the yogis explored the Lotus Temple, one of the most visited buildings in the world. Like all Baha'i houses of worship, it is open to all religions and considering the faith's emphasis on spiritual unity of mankind and celebration of diversity in race and culture was a fitting and uplifting start to the group's journey.

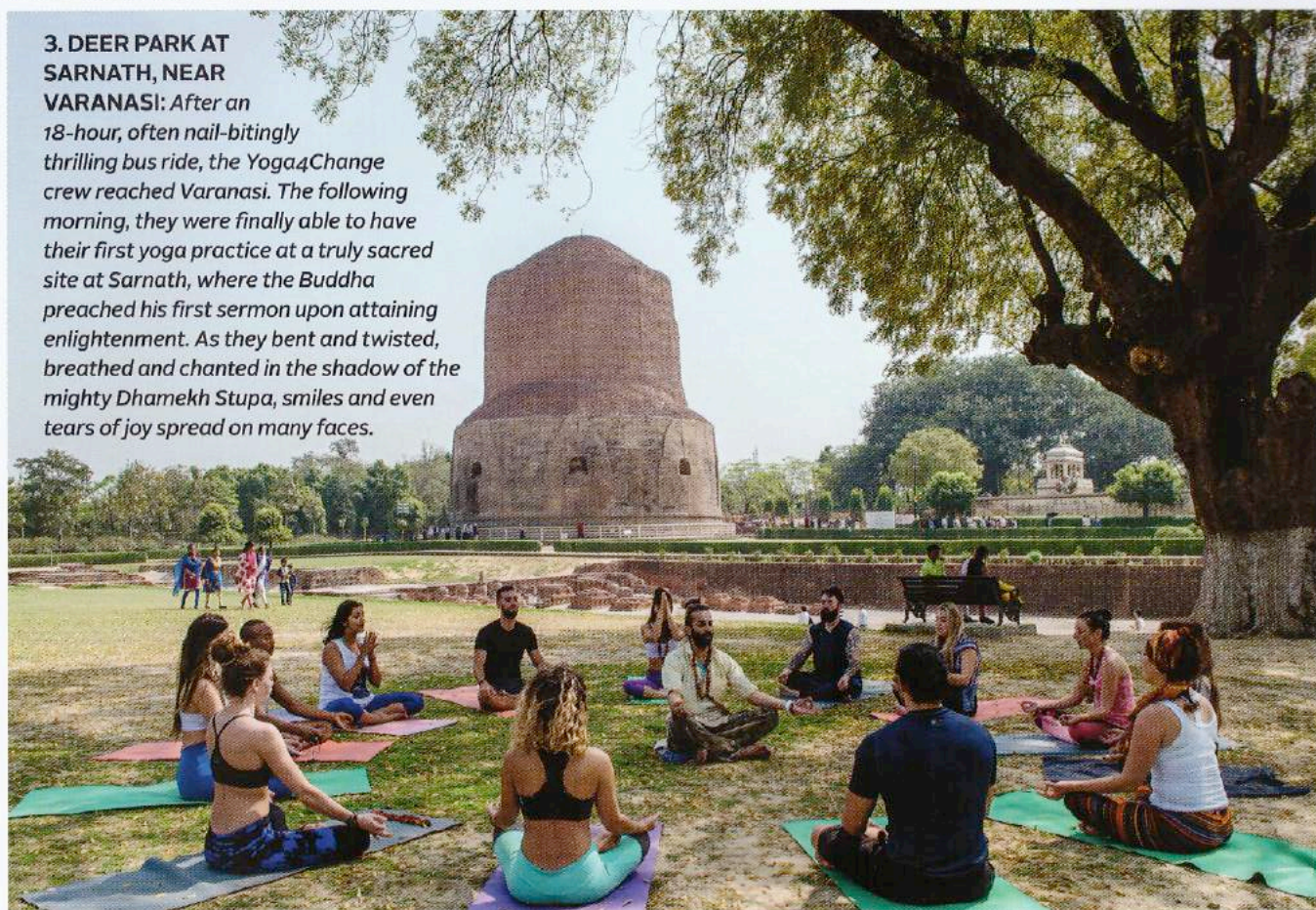


2. TAJ MAHAL, AGRA: *The spiritual high of the Lotus Temple visit came crashing down a few hours later at the Taj Mahal, the next pit stop. Many were shocked at the squalid conditions surrounding the Taj's splendour, given that half of Agra's 1.7 million population live in one of almost 400 slums. That evening a rat ran across one yogi's chest during practice at the less than charming accommodation. Things could only get better from here.*

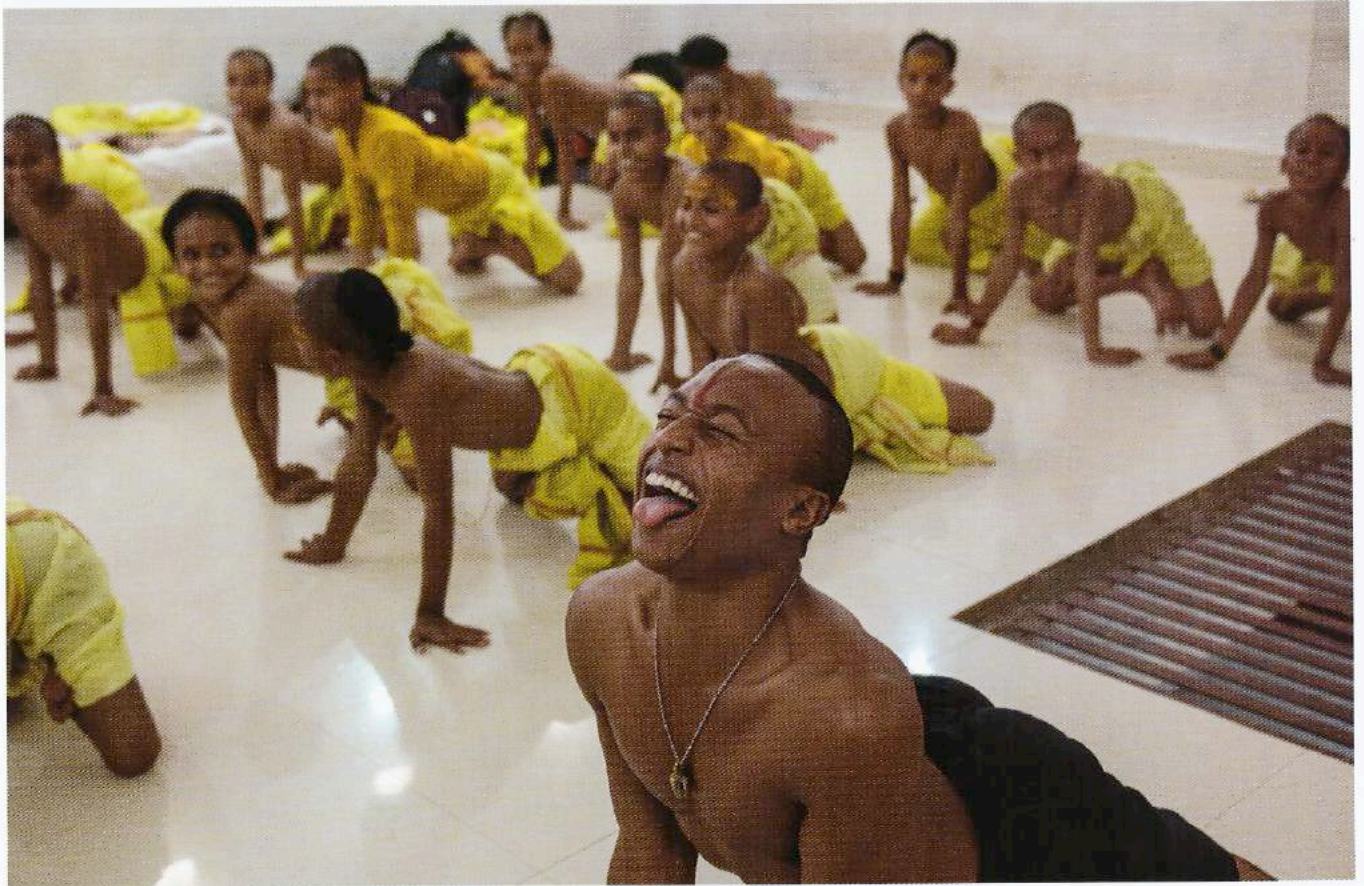
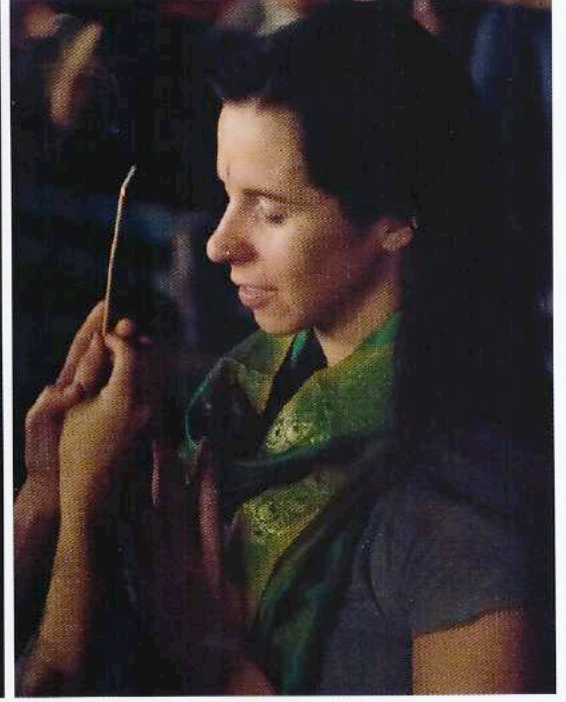


3. DEER PARK AT SARNATH, NEAR VARANASI:

After an 18-hour, often nail-bitingly thrilling bus ride, the Yoga4Change crew reached Varanasi. The following morning, they were finally able to have their first yoga practice at a truly sacred site at Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon upon attaining enlightenment. As they bent and twisted, breathed and chanted in the shadow of the mighty Dhamekh Stupa, smiles and even tears of joy spread on many faces.



4. ARTI CEREMONY VARANASI: *That evening, after practice at the Dashashwarmedh Ghat, the crew joined the arti ceremony which is held every evening on the sacred waters of the Ganga. In a deeply devotional ritual, the yogis joined hundreds of pilgrims in offering glowing tea lights encased in flowers which they sent floating downstream to the rhythmic chanting of priests and clanging of cymbals.*



5. *The visit to the INTERNATIONAL CHARITABLE CHANDRAMAULI TRUST was probably the highlight of the trip for many. The yogis had a chance to learn about the incredible boys at this school for orphaned and impoverished children, whose daily routine includes meditation, asana and pranayama practice, as well as the study of Sanskrit and the Vedas. In exchange, the boys had a taste of acro and laughter yoga.*

6. GURPA MOUNTAIN: After a physically challenging trek up the 1,000 steps of Gurpa Mountain, the Yoga4Change team soaked in the peaceful atmosphere and watched the sun setting on the small golden stupa that marks the place where Mahakasyapa, one of the Buddha's principal disciples, is waiting in a state of Samadhi for the arrival of the New (or Maitreya) Buddha.



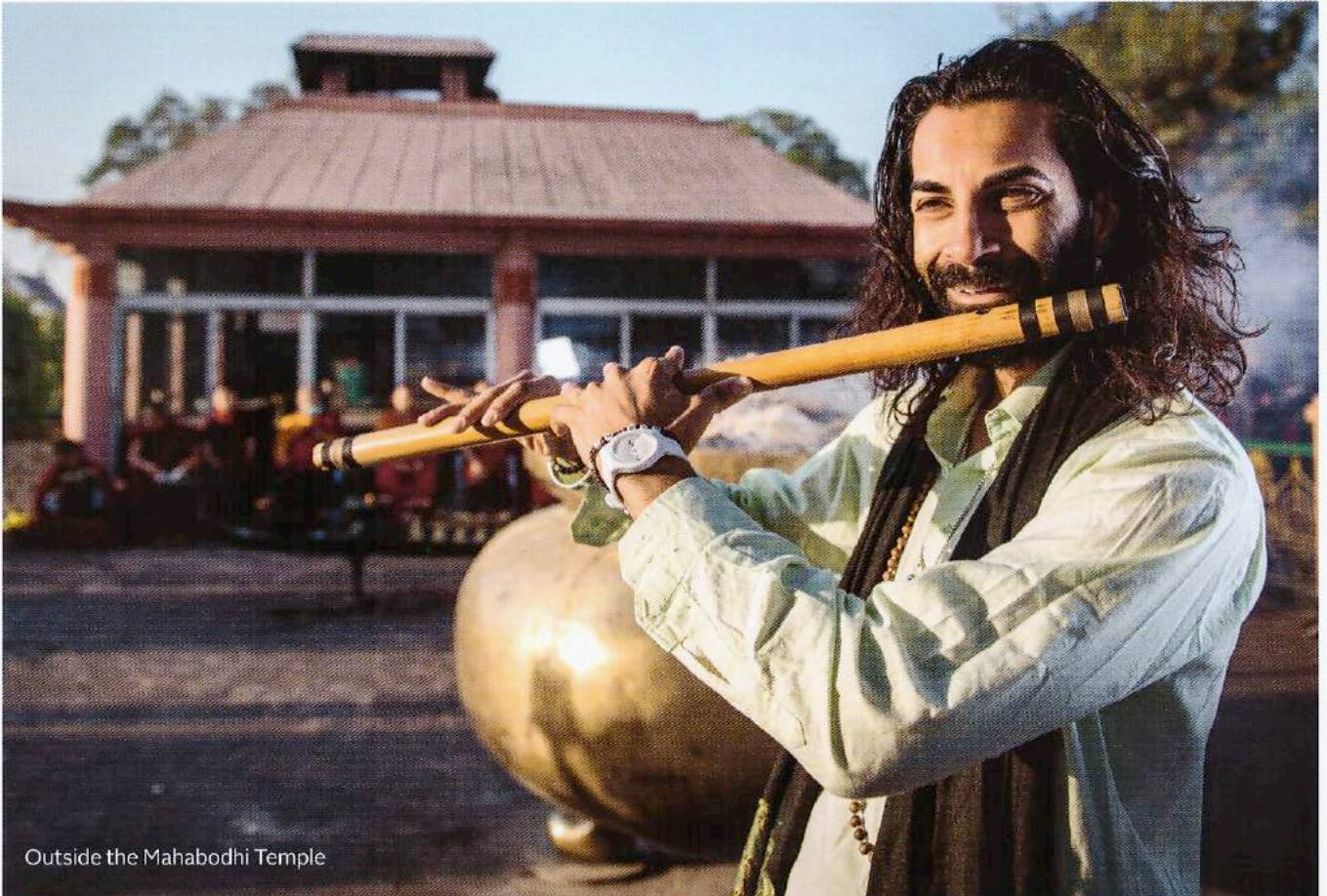
7. MAHABODHI TEMPLE: The next day, the yogis watched the sunrise over the Mahabodhi Temple, where the Buddha meditated for three days and three nights underneath the sacred Bodhi Tree and eventually attained enlightenment. They practiced asanas as smoke rose from a giant cauldron and a group of monks chanted mantras. Their skin prickled in the heat of hundreds of candles in the prayer room and their minds cleared as they mediated underneath the holy tree's expansive branches.



Inside the Mahabodhi Temple



8. NALANDA UNIVERSITY: *The Yoga4Change team also practiced among the ruins of the ancient Nalanda University, a Buddhist monastery and center of learning between 7,000 BCE and 1,200 CE. Both, Buddhist monks from Thailand and a group of young Sikhs from Punjab were intrigued as they watched the asana practice and requested to take photos with the American visitors.*



Outside the Mahabodhi Temple

feature

9. XUANZANG MEMORIAL:

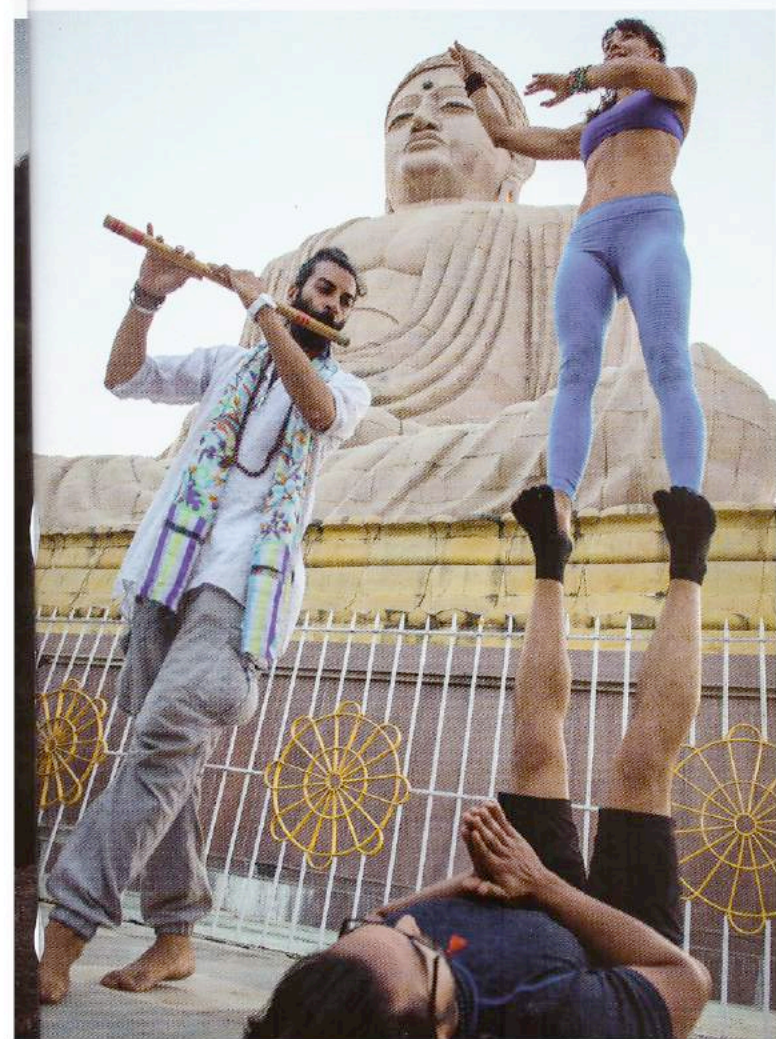
Much of the knowledge we have about Buddhism in India today we owe to the Chinese monk Xuanzang, whose chronicle of his 18-year journey to India in the 16th century is one of the primary sources for the study of medieval India. To commemorate his invaluable contribution, the Chinese built a memorial hall near Nalanda, where the Yoga4Change crew soaked in the historic atmosphere and peacefully ended their day.



10. VULTURES PEAK: *The second hike up a mountain took the yogis to the top of Vultures Peak, the Buddha's favourite sanctuary, where he held many retreats and trainings. They practiced Kundalini and Acro Yoga and listened to the prayers of Japanese as well as Thai pilgrims as night set in.*



11. RUKMANISTAN: The morning near the village of Rukmanistan was different from the rest of the trip. Instead of the quiet reverence and peaceful serenity of historical sites the Yoga4Change crew had frequented thus far, the local residents joined their visitors in joyful singing and dancing in front of a temple whose ancient Buddha statue they now worship as Rukmani Devi, Lord Krishna's principal wife and queen.



12. GREAT BUDDHA:

Finally, the Yoga4Change team practiced acro yoga in the shadow of the mighty Great Buddha resting atop a lotus and soaring 25 metres into the sky.

