

Excerpt from *Meeting Shiva: Falling and Rising in Love in the Indian Himalayas*

(Changemakers Books, 2013)

“How long have you known me?” he asked playfully, eyes sparkling, head propped on one hand as we lay on the bed in his secret room.

“Oh, I don’t know... years? A lifetime? Millennia? It seems like a very long time,” I replied with a smile. In truth, I felt there was never a time I did not know him.

“Yes.” He suddenly grew serious, and a dark shadow fluttered across his dreamy brown eyes, like a ripple on a still summer lake. *“We’re connected by birth.”*

Shiva’s Song

The young *sannyasi* entered the temple quietly and sat cross-legged on the floor. He wore the flowing saffron-colored robes of his religious order, with the top half draped elegantly around his upper body. His face was round, beautiful in an almost childlike way, with full, sensuous lips and smooth skin the color of almonds.

Fleetingly, he looked across the candlelit temple, which was filled with Indian worshippers ready for the evening *aarti* ceremony. From my place near the right side of the altar, where I sat sandwiched between two Bengali women in saris, I caught his glance briefly. Was it my imagination, or was there a hint of melancholy in his dark brown eyes?

The *sannyasi* directed his gaze toward the altar, took a deep breath, and began to play the small harmonium that stood in front of him. As the accordion-like sounds started to weave their way around the temple, it seemed to transform from a dreary, cold concrete structure into an enchanting sanctuary.

Suddenly, over the evocative, almost mournful chords of the instrument rose a strong, clear voice that sang a song so haunting—filled with such passion and devotion—that my body began to tingle all over.

Fascinated, I listened to the chant of *Om Namah Shivaya*, an ancient Sanskrit mantra in praise of the Hindu God Shiva, and felt as though I had somehow, magically, been transported into a different, faraway age.

The melody reverberated around the temple and drifted out of the barred windows into the snow-covered mountains that surrounded us.

I was transfixed and could not stop looking—no, staring—at the *sannyasi*, who, with his eyes closed and head tilted back, appeared completely lost in his act of worship, until another, elderly monk sat down in front of me and blocked my view. I looked across the sea of faces toward my friend MJ, who knelt near the rear of the room, and noticed tears running down her face from beneath closed eyes.

I turned back toward the altar. My heart filled with the sweetest ache. I had never heard anything so beautiful in my entire life.

Prologue

This is a story of love. It is not a conventional love story, but the tale of an unusual meeting that had the power to change my life completely.

In the spring of 2008, I was at the end of an epic overland trip through the Himalayas. I had left my hometown of Leamington Spa in England eight months previously for a train journey that had taken me through many different countries, including Russia, Mongolia, Tibet, and Nepal. After reading a newspaper article about a tribe called the Kalash who lived in the Hindu Kush Mountains, I had set out to Pakistan to celebrate the Winter Solstice festival with them.

With a great passion for travel and spirituality, I'd been fascinated to learn about this colorful tribe who lived a life filled with ancient gods, temples, fire rituals, and feasts. I wanted to meet them—and at the same time fulfill my life's dream: to travel the world.

This was my first big trip. I'd always wanted to travel, ever since I was a little girl. I dreamt about adventures in strange lands, treasures waiting to be uncovered, and destinies that had to be fulfilled. But apart from short trips, my job as a manager in the music business had not allowed me to leave everything behind and follow the wind.

It took a severe burnout at the age of twenty-seven and a breakdown for me to trade workaholism and revelry in for a degree in psychology and a calmer way of life. I started to practice yoga and meditate, slowly discarding layers of an old personality that no longer fit.

When I turned thirty-five, I decided the time had finally come to live my dream of traveling. I sold my house, surrendered my remaining work responsibilities, and gave away most of my possessions to follow the call

of my soul. And, not prone to doing things in halves, I chose to travel overland to fully experience the countries I was about to cross. I wanted to appreciate the journey as well as the destination, and I knew this trip would become the adventure of a lifetime.

Before I left, I set several intentions for my trip. One of my quests was to become fully aligned with my soul's purpose. I wasn't entirely sure what that purpose was, but I wanted it to reveal itself to me. I trusted that the journey would lead me to where I needed to be and show me what I came to this planet to do—something I had inklings about, but had yet to discover fully.

My other major intention had to do with love—and the ancient spiritual path of *Tantra* that I had recently become interested in. Tantra is a passionate path: a route to enlightenment and bliss that does not require abstinence from worldly pleasures. Its practices work with human passions, instead of against them.

In stark contrast to most religions, in Tantra, sexual union is not seen as impure but as a potential prayer and meditation.

These ideas resonated deeply with me—the niece of a Catholic priest who had long grown tired of dogma. I'd given up religion two decades earlier to explore a more life-affirming, female-friendly spirituality. That sex could be sacred confirmed something I'd felt in my bones for a long time. Although I had never experienced lovemaking in this conscious way, I'd had glimpses and knew it to be true. I just didn't know how to find it.

I had explored some Western Tantra courses in the past, but found them disappointing—focused mainly on erotic techniques between strangers, missing the point entirely. So I hoped to find a spiritual teacher on my travels through the Himalayas, where Tantra originated. Someone who could lead me deeper onto the path and show me what this union of opposites truly meant.

Deep down, of course, I was hoping to meet a man—someone who lived and breathed Tantra and would share his knowledge with me. I wanted to meet the person who could teach me about love, about opening my heart, and about the transcendental lovemaking that connects us with the Divine. I craved this connection more than anything else—and, more than that, I craved transformation.

Ultimately, I was on a quest to meet my soul mate. With a string of failed relationships behind me, I felt I hadn't yet met my match. For one reason or another, I'd walked out of every single relationship in my life, but still

believed in meeting “The One”—and for me that meant a spiritual man who would see and love me as I was, without wanting to change me or curb my freedom.

And so I wandered through the Himalayas in Tibet, Nepal, and Pakistan—but my tantric soul mate didn’t materialize. Apart from a brief fling with a Pakistani mountaineer and an even briefer encounter with a Mongolian horseman, nothing amorous occurred. Except for a few Tibetan Buddhist nuns who did not speak English and a Nepalese shaman who chain-smoked Marlboros, I didn’t even come close to meeting anyone who knew much about Tantra.

Not wanting to go home empty-handed, I decided to cross the border to India and go to Rishikesh, a small town in the Himalayan foothills. Rishikesh—one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites for Hindus—has the reputation of being the world’s yoga capital. Maybe I could find my tantric soul mate there, I thought.

And so, on the banks of the Ganga, I spent my time studying yoga and immersing myself in Hindu spirituality, meditation, and rituals. I even moved into a yoga ashram. But although I met wonderful people and had a beautiful time, the man of my dreams didn’t appear. I had been so sure I would meet him before I started my journey, but now I began to wonder whether he existed at all.

After four months in India, I decided that enough was enough. The soul mate had had ample time to show up. I was tired and wanted to go home. I’d had enough amazing experiences to last a lifetime—and maybe my intuition about the tantric man had all been an illusion. So, without much further ado, I booked my ticket back to Europe.

To leave India on a high, I set out on one last adventure. Together with my French-Canadian friend MJ, I left for a camping trip to the Himalayas. We wanted to immerse ourselves in glorious mountain landscapes, visit ancient temples, meet mystical *sadhus*, and have a magical time before going home with a treasure chest full of memories.

This book is the story of what happened then, in those final weeks after I had resolved to go home. Strangely, on the very first evening after leaving Rishikesh, under the most unlikely circumstances, I met the man I had been waiting for all my life. He was the man I had dreamt of—and in many ways, he exceeded my wildest expectations. My match.

What I hadn’t bargained for was that he was a *sannyasi*—a celibate Hindu monk who lived in an austere ashram in the remote Himalayas.

This is the story of our meeting.