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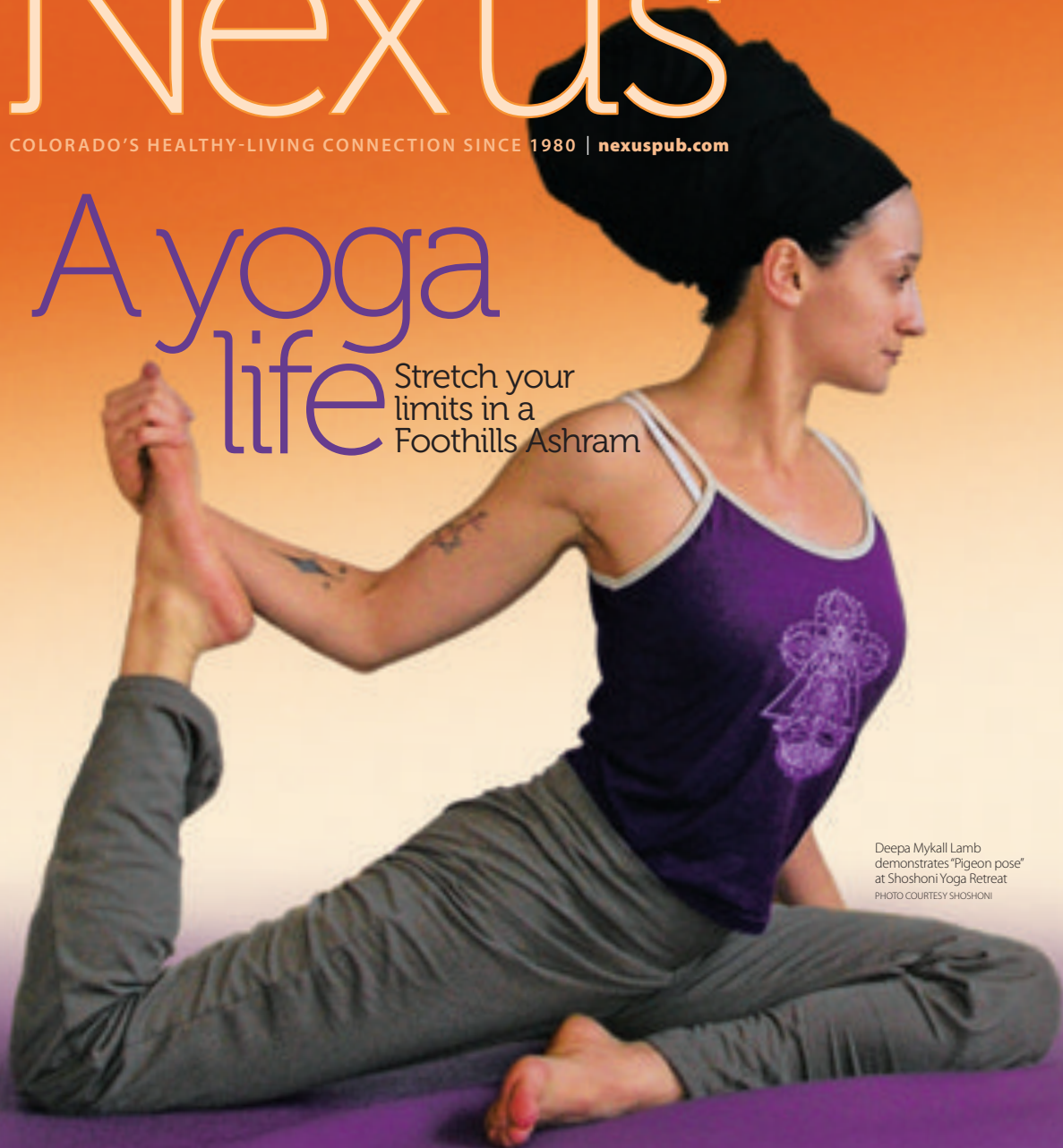
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Deepa Mykall Lamb
demonstrates "Pigeon pose"
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Glimpsing Enlightenment

An interview with Nicole Grace by Ravi Dykema

YOU WON'T FIND HER PHOTO ON HER WEBSITE, OR ON THE DUST JACKET OF HER AWARD-WINNING BOOKS. In fact, few people even know what Nicole Grace looks like. "I don't even let people take a photograph of me," she says. "A cult can grow around a personality, and an idea of what enlightenment should look like. And I know enlightenment can look like anything."

In Grace's case it started with an education in private prep schools and Ivy League colleges and studying poetry at Cambridge University. She was a seemingly unlikely candidate for an esoteric path of meditation and mysticism. But after a visceral, life-changing spiritual experience, she engaged the help of a spiritual teacher who taught her in the ways of traditional Tantric mysticism and the Bodhisattva path – how to use her experiences with enlightenment to support others.

A mystic, ordained Buddhist monk and gifted poet, Grace

is the author of *Bodhisattva: How to be free – teachings to guide you home* (Mani Press, 2010) and *Mastery at Work: 18 keys for achieving success, fulfillment and joy in any profession* (Mani Press, 2005). She's a sought-after international speaker in the fields of personal and professional development, Buddhism, mysticism and meditation. Here, she speaks with *Nexus* about spirituality in the business world, the true meaning of Tantra yoga, and what "enlightenment" really looks like.

RD: You're an ordained Buddhist monk. But your book "Mastery at Work: 18 Keys for Achieving Success, Fulfillment and Joy in Any Profession," sounds like a business book.

NG: It was a business book, on the surface. I wrote it to appeal to people I met in the business world, who might otherwise never enter a class on meditation. I hoped that the book would give them the tools they needed to turn their work life into a spiritual path. It was a way of teaching karma yoga, as part of an essential pathway to enlightenment in the modern world.

RD: Could you explain "karma yoga?"

NG: Karma yoga is a way of bringing spirituality into your work life. I have encountered so many people who meditate in the morning, and then that's it: their meditation is over, and they go about their day in a mind-state of chaos, anxiety and despair. Maybe at the end of the day, if they're disciplined, they meditate again. And that's their spiritual practice.

I have spent many years teaching that spiritual practice never has to end. If you can utilize those 8 or 10 hours that you work every day as part of your spiritual process, you'll be much happier.

RD: How did you first get involved in bringing spirituality into business?

NG: I spent many years in technical and project management, and in organizational change consulting around the world. Then I was an executive on Wall Street with the International Securities Exchange. They did not have project management at the time, and they were growing rapidly from a boutique firm into a real powerhouse. They saw that they needed structure, so they brought me in as one of a very small number of officers of the company.

I was working directly with the COO, and I was tasked with building a project management department from the ground up, creating a methodology for them. It was very exciting! People who meditate see the world structurally. So it was actually a natural task for me, although it was a very unusual appointment. Being a woman of only 31 at the top echelon of a Wall Street corporation was not commonplace at the time.

RD: You must have had a stellar resume, or some stunning prior education. I imagine it wasn't your hours of meditation that got you the job.

NG: I would disagree with that. I think meditation gives you an unusual clarity, an ability to see each person with your heart, and build things and work in a way that will develop each person in their tasks.

RD: But you must have had some kind of prior relevant experience. What was your training?

NG: I graduated with a Liberal Arts degree from Vassar, and I had no interest in technology whatsoever. I was in an elite writing program at Columbia with the author Ethan Canin, and I was looking at how I could use writing as a career.

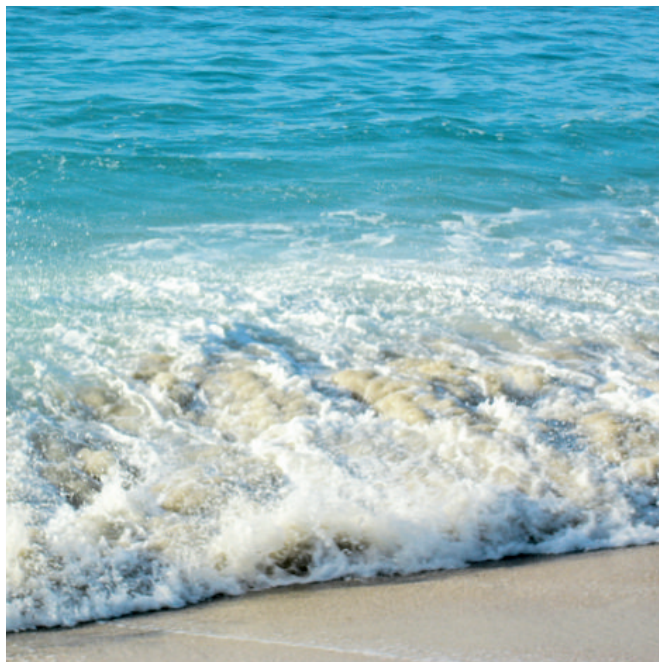
Then I had a very unusual experience. My crown chakra opened shortly after graduating, and I had no idea what had happened to me. The top of my head blew open. And the light of the universe just poured in like a fire hose pointed down. I had no training, but I knew it was significant and should be explored. I had always been interested in spirituality, and I knew there was more than just the world that was being sold to us. So I went looking for explanations and for a teacher.

I met an extraordinary teacher. He was traditional, in the school of Tantric Buddhist mysticism; it's essentially the pathway to enlightenment through direct experience of the Divine, without the formal organized structures of the Buddhist religion. Tantra translates as a weaving. It was a weaving of mysticism from every possible corner: Hinduism, Christian mysticism, Kabbalah, anything that works.

RD: What was the name of your teacher?

NG: That I don't talk about, except to my closer students. It's too personal, and it's very special to me. But what he said to me rang so true. If you're really interested in meditation and enlightenment, you must have a strong mind. Spirituality isn't some spaced-out, New Age, crystal-hugging approach, meaning no disrespect to those avenues. You have to have mental structures that can hold the light when it gets intense, and not fall apart.

What I learned was a Bodhisattva path. You're not just



GRACE-FUL VISION: Photographs taken by Nicole Grace during her travels depict the serenity of nature.

learning how to retain your own enlightenment, but you're building up your strength so that your enlightenment will be a support for others. "Bodhisattva" literally translates as "enlightenment:" (bodhi) and "being" (sattva). It's not the sort of path where you squeeze yourself through the door and then run off into the mountains.

The first thing my teacher said was, "You must learn to program a computer, or learn some kind of science, math or technology." Computer science, at the time, was the way to make a decent amount of money.

It's not unusual, in this day and age, for teachers to recommend some kind of math or business-oriented training. It helps you structure your mind, and if you're not in a monastery, you need to support yourself.

RD: You mentioned that this path was Tantric. Many people associate that with sacred sexuality.

NG: Thank you for bringing that up. I don't usually use the word "Tantra" because of that. My studies didn't incorporate any aspect of what people now associate with Tantra.

The reason Tantra took on the association it has with

sexuality is because spirituality in many areas was associated with asceticism and celibacy. Tantra, in its purest form, embraces everything, and it directly addresses the desire and aversion problem by suggesting that running away from any experience or being afraid of any experience, is just as bad as desiring it.

Tantra got associated with sex, when in fact all it means is you weave in everything. If your mind is in Divine communion, everything you do is holy, as long as you're not causing harm. Sex is not inherently less spiritual than walking through a garden, if your mind is in the right place. But in my training, we were not given specific instructions. We weren't told, "Be celibate. Don't be celibate." We weren't told what to do with our intimate practice. It was more like "Let's develop the mind and not be afraid of anything contaminating us." Because that's just a state of fear.

RD: You described your crown chakra opening. Was that during a meditation?

NG: No, I was listening to some music and it just happened out of nowhere; it was like being struck by lightning.



RD: Can you recall anything that you think catalyzed it prior to that event?

NG: I would say because of my lifelong interest in spirituality that it was ingrained from past lives. I know that from as far back as I can remember to the age of about 5 or 6 I was constantly in light. Everything was just fluid gold light. I had no idea this was different from anyone else's experience.

Right around when I turned 6 that sort of faded away and the world became more solid. I was very unhappy that I had lost this connection, and then I was confused for a time, and lonely. When I became a teenager I started finding my way back. The crown chakra opening, according to my practice, happened because I'd done practices in past lives, and it just tends to come back.

RD: When you say "crown chakra opening," what exactly did that feel like?

NG: I only recently put a label on it. I had no idea what it was at first. But all of a sudden it felt like the circle at the top of my head, literally in the scalp, had been lasered open. The

barrier had been removed and something poured in. It felt like a substance, as you would imagine water coming out of a fire hose, but I saw it and experienced it as light. That thick stream from above poured into my head with incredible, almost terrifying force. It was just on the verge of painful, but I think, at that moment, I was in too much shock to be experiencing it as pain.

RD: You didn't feel fear that you were being obliterated or you were going to die?

NG: No, no, nothing like that. It was a startling sensation – I've never physically felt anything else like that – but at the same time there was something familiar and appealing about it. I think what was more startling than anything was that it wasn't a one-second lightning strike. It lasted for quite a few minutes.

RD: Then it stopped?

NG: And then it stopped, and I wanted it back. I just couldn't move. I sat there for a while, wondering what had just hap-

pened. I didn't have an education in spirituality; I had no background, no idea what this was. But I wasn't afraid after it stopped. There was no sense of "I'm in danger," ever.

RD: Would you say that you were enlightened after that experience?

NG: I've encountered many different definitions of enlightenment, and I have a very conservative definition. A lot of people walk around and call themselves enlightened, and I'm not buying it. People are very quick to put that label on themselves or another person. People want what they think comes along with "enlightenment"—money, power, worship. But it's a dangerous label. If you're following a teacher who claims enlightenment, you may end up emulating someone who hasn't finished his or her own journey. If you believe you're enlightened, the danger is that you won't complete your process.

RD: What is your definition of enlightenment?

NG: I think a lot of people call one moment of liberation "enlightenment," and I don't see it that way. In these moments of liberation, you're suddenly annihilated—everything you are, everything you believed yourself to be, all the patterns, the mental thoughts that create you as an individual, they're gone. There's this moment where you just surrender it. There is no more you. There's no more individual, no more identity. You are washed away in an ecstatic oneness at that moment.

While you're changed forever afterward, the moment of liberation does not go on and on. It's like being in a pitch-black forest, and suddenly, lightning flashes and you see everything. There are trees there. There's a path there, and a stone there. But then it's dark again.

People can become very egotistical after these moments of liberation. They think, "Well, now I'm done, I'm enlightened, I'm God." Yeah, okay, you're God, but so is everybody. But you're not enlightened. You had a moment of liberation, but there's still the potential for suffering. If you have one of these moments, it's important to exercise great discipline and restraint, and not walk around with a big neon sign saying "I'm fabulous now!" Just keep quiet inwardly, stay humble, and be grateful for that grace. Over time, if you're lucky, the

lightning flashes again. And there's the sense of liberation and the awakening again. And then again, and again.

Enlightenment is a process. It's the sunlight fully rising and burning off the fog. That's what my teacher called it. And it takes time. But after time, using the analogy of the forest, the lightning just keeps flashing and never stops, and then the flash stops and the light just remains. That's enlightenment: where it doesn't go dark anymore.

RD: You're speaking as if this has happened to you.

NG: Yes.

RD: Was the point where the darkness didn't come back, a specific moment in time?

NG: It's more a process. I think there just comes a day when you realize it never gets dark anymore. That crown chakra opening experience was not liberation. I was just very lucky, and it prepared me to meditate in a way that I am sure I could not have meditated otherwise. When I meditated, I easily went into some of the higher states of mind right away. I would experience these incredible amounts of ecstasy pouring through my whole being; the whole world took on a sheen of sparkling gold beauty.

Meanwhile, at this point, my teacher was telling me to go make a bunch of money and be fabulous on Wall Street. So while all of this was happening, I was also a global consultant with a pharmaceutical company. I meditated every morning, and I remember this time when I had just gone somewhere gorgeous and I didn't quite come out of it, but I had to get to work. Meditation is not always convenient.

I managed to get dressed and get over to the office, and I was in a morning meeting with the senior management, and the whole room was just dissolving in waves of light. I couldn't see the guy. I could barely hear him. I was just trying to hold it together, because I was being paid quite a lot of money to get the job done there. I think the job kept me sane through these extraordinary experiences.

RD: So they had no idea you were in a state of bliss?

NG: No, they had no idea. I had really good training in holding it together. At this point, I had a black belt in martial arts, with a very traditional practice. Martial arts is not about war,

or fighting. It's about structure and grace and chaos. That was a huge help, during my spiritual process, in my day-to-day dealing with the world.

There's an idea with these exalted experiences, let alone enlightenment, that the world's suddenly going to bow down to you and everything will go your way. That can be a devastating set of expectations, and not too humble, either.

The fact is, not everybody's going to be nice to you just because you've had some experiences of liberation, or you had a nice meditation in the morning. Not everyone is having their own nice experience. My martial arts training gave me a certain toughness, rather than a sense of entitlement. There's no sense of entitlement, because there's nothing special or important about you. You're just lucky because you're having a nice day, so all the more reason to bring kindness and tolerance to a whole new level, because the people you run into may not be having a nice day.

RD: I'm curious about your background. You have a black belt in martial arts, and you also play the violin and speak four languages. Could you talk about how those figure into your life?

NG: Yes. Some of my languages are a little rusty, but my French is very good. My Spanish is passable, and I used to be quite fluent in Italian, but it has devolved a little because I just don't have anyone to speak with.

RD: What about the violin? How did you get started playing?

NG: I played from a young age. I went to a very good prep school in Manhattan, and every student was required to spend a year playing a musical instrument. When I was 5 or 6, my mother asked me which one I wanted to play. I said, "What's the hardest one?" She said, "A violin," so I chose that. And I never stopped.

I fell deeply in love with violin and played in a number of orchestras. But I didn't like performing all that much, so I stopped playing in orchestras, and I just started playing on my own. I still practice, and I love it, though I don't play in public any longer. It's so personal, it feels like meditation.

RD: So in addition to being an ordained Buddhist monk and a woman with a powerful, high-earning career, you have a black belt in karate, you speak four languages and play the violin. You have a pretty fabulous-sounding life, and some people

hearing your story will think, "Wow, I wish I was her. I wish I had her talent. I wish I had my crown chakra opened, and those flashes of lightning that dispelled the darkness. I wish I had worked in a powerful job that gave me rich experiences and made so much money." Your poem, "The Best," (printed below) relates to this.

The Best

People
 Listen carefully
 even if you
 Took everything
 I own,
 Moved into my house,
 Wore all my clothes and
 Captured the attention of anyone
 I have loved
 You would still
 Never be me
 So stop
 Wasting your time.
 Better to cultivate
 Your own Self
 Your own Way.
 Then instead of
 Becoming a
 Shadow of someone else,
 An amateur imitation,
 You can be the
 World's only example
 Of the best of
 Yourself.

-By Nicole Grace, from *Bodhisattva*

NG: Well, I didn't make that much money, but I hear you. And I'm hardly famous. This is the first year that I've ever put my name on an advertisement for my teaching; that was simply because my name was on the cover of the book, and it was unavoidable. But I've been teaching thousands of people for over a decade, and you've never heard of me, and that's on purpose.

I don't have my photograph out in circulation, because a cult can grow around a personality, and an idea of what enlightenment should look like. And I know enlightenment can look like anything. It looks like you, it looks like me, it looks like every person on earth who just makes a decision to go be that. I know that, in the past, people have tried to emulate me. I had a couple of students who grew their hair long, and one of them dyed it brown. This idea that you have to look like me, speak like me, have my background, in order to be enlightened is not true, and I don't want anyone to ever think it is true.

There's a beautiful practice of guru yoga, and I respect teachers who put their images in circulation for students to love, but I am choosing not to do that. I think it's hard to avoid being competitive with or comparing yourself to the person you're emulating, if that person is someone in your time who speaks your language. I'm so anxious for people to believe that this experience is available to them, and I don't want anything as simple as a personality or a physical appearance to stand in the way.

My teacher had a certain educational background, a certain way of talking and dressing. And I wasn't anything like that. I'm such a polar opposite of my teacher. For one thing, I'm female, and I have certainly had the Tibetan teacher here and there say, "Well, pray for a noble rebirth, and maybe then you'll have your shot at enlightenment." I knew in my heart that couldn't be right, that eternity would pick a gender and make enlightenment available to that one and not the other. A gay man came to me once, weeping and saying, "I can't attain enlightenment" because he loved men. It's ridiculous. It's not who you love, it's just do you love enough?

RD: And the point is that anyone can be enlightened?

NG: Enlightenment is in everyone. We're all just a window looking out onto the same view; it's just that some windows have a little more crud on them and you've got to scrub it

"Enlightenment is in everyone. We're all just a window looking out onto the same view."

away. There are tools for scrubbing it away. Meditation is one. Karma yoga – the right mind while you're working – is another. There's a way of moving through the world, of practicing gratitude, humility, kindness, tolerance, contemplation. But everyone is just a window, and no one is more a window than anyone else. No one's window is bigger, it's just that some have cleared more away, so the light shines through more.

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