

The Original Ultralight Hikers

Or what do Hindu sadhus, Thai forest monks, and Grandma Gatewood have in common?

By Douglas Durham

A Himalaya Experience

Indian sadhus

Some years ago, I found myself trekking in the Himalayas with the Buddhist monk with whom I was training. We began our trek in Rishikesh, after a long night drive from New Delhi. Our initial objective was to travel along the Ganges all the way up to its source, a glacier near Gangotri; and then on to a remarkable 13,500 foot plateau surrounded by several 20,000 plus foot peaks, Tapovan. This route, followed for several millennia by Hindu sadhus on their pilgrimages to visit sacred sites, is little known: that is to say, little known to Westerners, for we saw only three other Westerners on the trail --interestingly enough, all women.

The monk was carrying his traditional begging bowl, an L.L. Bean daypack, and his umbrella, the kind used by ascetic Thai forest monks. I, on the other hand, was carrying the conventional pack with 35 pounds of stuff, including a tent, a stove and cooking gear. Before this trek, my previous experience in the outdoors was 3 1/2 years as a paratroop officer in the U.S. Army in the mid-1960s. The intervening 30 years had been spent as a rootless cosmopolite. I assumed that I was in good shape for such a trek, because I was a trail runner and could easily do a 20 mile run in the mountains of Virginia.

Throughout the morning, Hindu sadhus (Indian holy men) in their 60s or older routinely passed us. Wearing lightweight robes, carrying only small blankets and little water buckets, and wearing sandals, they would slow down awhile to chat and then take off at a pace I could not begin to maintain. Some were barefoot, carrying only small water pots, without even a blanket. However, like us, they were going to be traveling through several climactic zones and moving up to high altitudes, where it was quite cold at night.

About noontime, suffering from heat, hiking, and jet lag, I needed to stop at a secluded Hindu ashram nestled between two rivers. The young woman in her early 30s who ran the place allowed us to rest in a cool room during the heat of the day. As we were leaving and I was struggling to put on my overloaded pack, she looked at me and said, "You're too old and you have too much stuff."

I started shedding the stove and various other items the next day, as men much older than I, carrying almost nothing, kept blowing past us. As we moved higher and higher,

climbing toward the glacier where the Ganges River begins, I began to appreciate, while watching the sadhus hike in lightweight robes and sleep with just one blanket, that there was another approach to hiking.

Because this is a traditional pilgrimage route, there were shelters and small villages where one could obtain food and water every few kilometers. Thus, carrying a tent or stove was not necessary for the sadhus. However, they did not use rain gear, simply accepting the fact that they would get wet and then dry off when the sun came out.

I, of course, had rain gear. Thus, the first difference that I noticed between the sadhus and me was that I had brought my home with me on my back, whereas the sadhus had entered into homelessness. Entering into homelessness is a long tradition in Hindu religious practice, used to train the mind.

The other difference between the Indian sadhus and me was their lack of fear. The path that we were walking on was, in parts, not well maintained. It would occasionally narrow to less than the width of a hand, with a steep drop of several hundred feet. Other times we would suddenly be walking on shale, quite slippery: a misplaced step caused by a lapse in focus and over the edge you would go. My fear of falling was identical to the other fears I had, which had caused me to carry so much stuff. Essentially, I was afraid of change; I sought security.

As we walked for several days, we spent a considerable amount of time talking to the sadhus. (Many of them spoke English; the Buddhist monk spoke some Hindi, so he could talk to those who did not speak English.) What I came to see was that these pilgrims were from a wide variety of backgrounds. Many of them had led what we in the West would see as normal lives: teachers or army officers or bankers. Upon retiring, they had abandoned, at least temporarily, their ties to that life and had taken up the life of a sadhu.

This change is part of their culture. While it would be incorrect to say that large numbers followed this path, it is regarded as something admirable. Thus, some, if not most, of the old men who were zipping past us had not been doing this their entire lives but had come to it recently.

I asked those who had come to such arduous trekking late in life how they were able to lead such simple lives with so little gear. The answer seemed to be a version of the chicken and egg question. The trek for them is a holy pilgrimage, part of their training to achieve release from the eternal wheel of life. A step on that path to freedom is learning to do with less. By accepting the requirements to lead a simple life, rigorous as they are, one is forced to deal with the issues of reducing one's wants. (It is craving for and the attachment to physical sensations and mental concepts that, in their view, keep one bound to the endless cycle of birth and death.)

By reducing one's possessions and comforts -- leaving home and going into homelessness -- one begins the process of observing the mind responding to external

situations and wishing that things were other than they are. Thus if one is wet, one may wish to be dry. In their case they simply accept being wet. By setting out on such a journey with so little, either one learns to control the mental responses or one returns to home.

On this trip I myself returned early to home because I had not yet learned to control my mental responses. I had made a call to my wife several days into the trip. The gist of what I learned in the call was that her father had had a heart attack, possibly had cancer; our soon-to-be two-year-old daughter had a fever of 103 degrees; and "You are in India, you so and so." I used this as an excuse to return early. The real reason was that I was frequently afraid and extremely uncomfortable and just wanted to go home.

Thai forest monks

I had mentioned earlier that the monk with whom I was traveling was carrying a Thai forest-monk umbrella. These monks, following the Buddha's instructions to lead a simple life, call what they do "going into homelessness."

Their concept of going into homelessness is once again the idea of accepting a rigorous requirement for simplicity. By deciding to go as simply as possible, they set up the situation where they will see how the mind creates its own needs. If this sounds similar to what the sadhus do, it is, because the Buddha just took over that practice when he saw how successful it had been to help free the mind of its many attachments.

These monks wander the forests and jungles of Thailand, wearing one set of robes, carrying a begging bowl, an extra set of robes, and maybe a toothbrush and a sewing kit, along with an umbrella with bug netting; definitely under the 10 to 12 pounds of gear which some people use as a definition of ultralight hiking.

They sleep out of doors using the umbrella, trees, or rocks as a shelter. They expose themselves to hardships and dangers, such as wild tigers, for one purpose: to train what we would call their minds, but what they call their heart/mind. They will go to areas where there are tigers to meditate at night in order to observe their fear arise as they hear tigers growling in the jungle. This is similar to seeking an area in the American West where there are grizzly bears in order to see how one responds to their presence.

Like the Hindu sadhus, these monks come from many backgrounds. They do not start as exceptional people. Again, we can see normal people training their minds/bodies to accept challenges as opposed to fleeing from them.

Grandma Gatewood

Then we have Grandma Gatewood, at first glance someone of our own culture, or at least closer to our own culture. Mrs. Gatewood, born in the 1880s, walked the AT

twice in the 1950s wearing US Keds and carrying a blanket (not a sleeping bag), like the Hindu sadhus. Her gear weighed between 14 and 17 pounds. She used a shower curtain for shelter.

How is it that an old woman with minimal gear can walk the AT twice while of the over 2000 or so people who might start an AT thru-hike each year roughly 200 finish? My guess is that we might learn part of the answer by looking at the culture in which she was raised.

While she seems, at first glance, someone of our own culture, she is not. Her culture, the American frontier, with its subsistence-farming world, has now vanished. While it was in existence, it bred, of necessity, hearty, self-reliant people who accepted reality as it was and endured.

While frontier self-reliance, created by necessity, differs from that of the sadhus and the monks who choose radical simplicity, the results are the same: steadiness in the face of reality, otherwise known as adversity. The sadhus, the monks, and Grandma Gatewood have all learned to control their responses to what they could not control.

Ourselves

While the culture that bred Grandma Gatewood has passed, there are still many normal people who can acquire the same toughness and resiliency.

As an American example of controlling mental responses, below is a part of an interesting and revealing post from one of the Backpacking Light discussion-group e-mails. The author is discussing the use of a SilPoncho as a ground cloth:

"I couldn't figure out a way to make it work to my satisfaction and didn't think anyone else would be able to, either. Then...I met a genuine ultra- ultra liter on a rain soaked trail who was using a pocket space blanket as his poncho. We camped together at 11,000 feet in a cold rain in some krumholtz that night and I couldn't help but notice that his only space blanket was also his tarp AND his ground cloth! He seemed dry and was happy as a clam the next morning..."

This is a clear example of the mental attitude of largely accepting things the way they are, allowing one to take a minimal amount of stuff. It is also an example of how we can learn from the examples of others what we are capable of doing.

There is a similar anecdote from one of the trekking guidebooks that deals with the Everest area. The author is the owner of a major trekking outfit in Nepal. He tells the story of going up a pass toward Tibet at about 18,000 feet. He has on full gear for cold conditions and is carrying a heavy pack that extends over his head. Coming from the other side is a Tibetan wearing substantially less and carrying essentially a daypack. The Tibetan has an extra pair of Chinese shoes (prone to falling apart) and a blanket

or two and a few snacks to eat. The Westerner has all of the things that he has been trained to believe he needs to satisfy his cravings and attachments.

Ray Jardine, in his book on going light, discusses the phenomenon of craving and attachment, although he does not use those terms, and he provides a very simple way to deal with it. His suggestion, if I recall correctly, was to take the traditional piece of gear, for example a tent, and the new piece of gear, for example a tarp, at the same time. One would try to use the tarp, having the tent for security as a backup in case one needed to return to more accustomed patterns of behavior. The idea here is elegantly simple: you gradually see that you can let go of things or concepts that you have become attached to.

To the extent that I understand what I have done as I moved towards lightweight backpacking, it is as uncomplicated as that. You clearly look at each piece of gear that you use and ask, "Why am I attached to that?" The answer always has to do with a previous pattern of craving. One craves the seeming security of the tent because it reminds one of home, with walls and the floor. And so forth. Jardine even has an especially apt phrase: leave home at home. (Thai monks used umbrellas before Jardine was born and the sadhus practiced going into homelessness for millennia. There is nothing new under the sun.)

Henry David Thoreau, who wrote *Walden*, about living simply and close to nature, is typical of someone starting on this path. Those who read *Walden* get the impression of a man who spent the bulk of his time trying to simplify his life, little realizing that he would walk into town, give the females of his mother's household his laundry, and then go off and eat lunch with friends. It has been well said that we should not look too closely at Thoreau: possibly we might recognize ourselves.

I tell the story to raise one issue: observe the range of ways you can react to reality. One way, different from Thoreau's, is that of a song by Mary Chapin Carpenter with the lyrics:

"I'll take my chances; I don't mind working without a net."

In another song her lyrics describe the challenge for any song or article such as this is:

"Tell me something I don't know, instead of everything I do."

Up to this point, this article, in one sense, is about what you already know, if only from reading previous issues of BackpackingLight.com. That is to say, it is possible to hike with very simple gear. Monks, sadhus, Grandma Gatewood, and plenty of others have done it. They can do it for one simple reason: they have the self-reliance to accept that life away from home is different.

To learn something you don't know – to learn better how to leave home at home and accept change -- try working without a net.

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A technique to help you adapt to change

How is it that some people can get by with a blanket where others need a 20-degree F sleeping bag?

To start to answer that question, let us look at an example of adapting to cold in a traditional Zen monastery in Japan, with a winter climate similar to that of Northern Virginia: the average highs might be around 40-45 degrees F; lows, 25-30 degrees F, with the occasional spike 10 or so degrees lower. An acquaintance of mine, who finished his Ph.D. in 1972 at Berkeley, went to Japan to do further study. As things worked out, he then spent more than a decade in a Zen monastery that was unheated throughout the year. He, and the other monks, would meditate and sleep in a room where the temperatures were routinely at night around 30 degrees F during the winter. The monks wore only robes and slept in them. My understanding is that they had straw mats and simple blankets for sleeping and that the temperature on occasion dropped as low as 15 degrees F.

I tell the story solely to make the point that it is possible for some people to get used to colder temperatures.

What are the techniques used to adapt to such challenges? The primary one is called mindfulness meditation. It involves training yourself to observe the sensations you feel without moving on to your typical response. Normally, for example, as the nighttime temperatures drop and one becomes cold, one notes -- I am cold -- and then does something about it. In this customary way one fails to observe first just the sensation that the body is cooling. One moves directly to perceiving that one's self is affected and must be protected from the change.

In mindfulness meditation one simply notes -- the body is cooling. After awhile, one notes resistance to that change. One will see the concept arising -- I am getting cold. The arising of the self-concept (the "I" who is getting cold) is the first part of the resistance to the change in body temperature. The "I am getting cold" thought has in it the seed for the next thought -- I am uncomfortable and must do something about it. Try to let those thoughts go and simply observe the body getting cold.

From time to time, to take the mind off the cooling of the body, you can simply follow your breath as it goes in and out of the nostrils. As you follow your breath, you will not be thinking about the cooling of the body. (The mind can focus on only one thought at a time.) One technique for beginners is simply to count each exhalation

from 1 to 10 and then start again at 1. Quite some time can elapse before you might again notice that you sense the cooling.

Experienced meditators will recognize this approach as just a variant on the instructions for observing and dealing with the pain you have in your knees when you first start seated meditation. Others will note that this is a technique used in cognitive therapy. That cognitive therapy technique is to put a gap between the stimulus and the response and then alter the habitual response.

The last point in applying the technique of putting a gap between stimulus and response is to compare yourself only with yourself. Do not concern yourself with the fact that you cannot achieve some extreme feat. All that matters after applying the technique for a while is whether you are capable of extending the temperature range in which you are comfortable. As in any learning of a new technique, expect to make incremental changes over time. (In some cases, like mine, it might take years.)

As a personal note, I hate cold weather. I am strictly a 3-season backpacker. For me snow, hot chocolate, and a fireplace near a window where I can look out at the lovely snow are synonymous. However, I have been able over many years to lower the temperature at which I can sit comfortably in meditation to around 45 degrees F from about 65. I know from my own experience and from that of others whom I have observed, you can, through such a technique, widen the temperature range in which you are comfortable. As Woody Allen says: 90 percent of success in life comes from just showing up. Simply being in a colder than usual environment and just relaxing and accepting it will go a long way towards success.

Those seeking more information on aspects of this approach might read *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, by Bhante Gunaratna, Wisdom Publications, 2001. (In the interests of full disclosure, I helped with that book and receive a portion of the royalties.)

Disclaimer: Nothing in this article should be considered an endorsement of any technique, trip, or person. Trying anything new involves risk (and maybe reward). Such loss or gain is solely the responsibility of those readers who want to take the risks.

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