

Great Western Yogi
Meeting John Oliver Black
by Richard A. Bowen © 2008

It was autumn 1978. The peace and love movement was over. I had graduated from high school some years before and had since attended college off and on. My friends and I could do nothing, it seemed, but watch the hopes of our generation fade.

In the midst of a divorce, I held an administrative position at Harley-Davidson Motor company. It was work I disliked but I had taken the job in hope that the steady income would aid in bringing my estranged wife and I back together. It hadn't. I was now two years into it and was growing restless.

In the early 1970's I had read the book *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. Having found the book to be an insightful, profound treatise on yoga and Eastern philosophy, I had read nothing since that came close to opening the doors it had. Written by a modern yogi and mystic, this autobiography is used as a textbook on college campuses around the world; it's author is one of the first India mystics to have lived in the West for a long period – over 30 years.

Earlier that year, I had recommended that my friend George read the book. Not much of a reader, he avoided doing so until, becoming ill and bedridden — stationary against his will, as it were — he had finally picked it up and plowed through it. George was making a living as a painter and plasterer then. On my recommendation, my landlord had contracted with him to patch a

hole in my bathroom ceiling; I was chatting with him while he worked one evening. “Have you read the *Autobiography of a Yogi* yet?” I asked.

“Yes. When I was sick a few months ago,” he replied, sanding the ceiling from a ladder.

“Did you like it?” I asked.

“Oh, I thought it was great!” he said, adding, “Do you know there is a man living in Michigan who knew Yogananda?”

“No I did not,” I replied.

Climbing down the ladder he said, “After I finished the *Autobiography*, I found out about a local meditation group that follows Yogananda. They meet Thursday nights at the YMCA. The people at the group told me about this man, and I drove to his retreat in Michigan and met him.”

Not knowing much about things spiritual — my father was an agnostic, my mother an atheist — I was at a loss to ask George more questions. But the next night when he came to continue his work, he brought some pictures. Shuffling through them, George said, “John Oliver Black’s retreat is in Michigan, in a rural setting away from civilization. Yogananda gave him the title *Yogacharya* which means ‘yoga teacher.’ I call him Mr. Black.” As he talked, I looked at the pictures. Snow-covered buildings in the woods, a peaceful lake, a waterfall. “This is where he lives,” George said. The picture revealed a modest house on the shores of the lake. “Here’s Mr. Black.” Sitting on a chair near a fireplace was the figure of a small, spectacled man with wispy hair. There seemed to be a glint of recognition in my mind. Was I perhaps recalling his face and smile from a distant time and place?

As George finished up work for the evening, he continued talking about Mr. Black and his 800 acre refuge, Song of the Morning Ranch. “He taught me the Kriya yoga technique three months ago,” George said. I remembered reading

about Kriya yoga in the *Autobiography of a Yogi*. A method of soul realization, it sounded fascinating, scientific. Of course, I had no idea that ordinary people like me could partake in its practice. But down-to-earth George was living proof of that. “Would you like to meet Mr. Black sometime?” he asked as he was leaving. Thinking about it momentarily I said, “Why not?”

We made plans for a long weekend to drive the 800 mile round trip to Michigan. I took a half day off of work. At noon on a Friday in late September, George, notorious for being late, miraculously arrived in front of my office on time. I threw my small suitcase and sleeping bag into the trunk and we were off.

We drove through the cool autumn air, out of the city and into northern Wisconsin and upper Michigan. In those days, we still smoked and took an occasional drink. George, a boxing fan, made sure we stopped every few miles at a bar to check on the progress of the fight between Muhammad Ali and George Fraser that was taking place that night. As the taverns became fewer in between, so did the cars. By midnight, we were alone on deserted highways. By 1:30 a.m. we had turned left at the sole stop light in Vanderbilt, Michigan, ten miles from our destination. By 2:00 a.m. we had turned in on a road that ran into thick woods, past a gold-lettered sign that read *Song of the Morning — A Yoga Retreat of Excellence*. Driving onto the grounds, the atmosphere was completely quiet except for the sound of the waterfall on the river. Small lamp posts lit up walkways leading between buildings and into the woods. As we got out of the car, George said, “Let me show you around.”

“At two o’clock in the morning?” I exclaimed.

“Shhh,” he whispered. “It will only take a few minutes. Come on.” We walked into a large, picture-windowed structure overlooking the waterfall and dam. George said, “This is the main dining house.” Shoes and boots lined up neatly near the door, white walls met gold carpeting, dark woodwork decor, clean

architectural lines. "Here is the kitchen and the office." George motioned me into a large, well-equipped kitchen and modern office, then pointed down a hallway with numerous doors leading from it. "Some of the staff live here," he explained.

After leaving the main house, we walked up a wooded hill to an older building. Inside was a spacious room with a big stone fireplace. "This is where meditations are held," George said. My tour continued when we walked over to a space-age, gold-colored building with large expanses of glass. "This building is being built for the male staff members," he said. Inside the nearly-completed structure were first floor offices, a carpenter shop, electrical shop, auto bay and areas for study, work and recreation. The second floor contained dorm-like living quarters with built-in beds, showers, toilets and sinks. Everywhere skylights and picture windows looked out into the sky and forest.

"Let's walk back to the car," my guide said. "I'll show you where we are going to sleep tonight." Reaching the car and getting in, we drove along a dirt road to three geodesic domes constructed in a meadow with woods on one side and the river on the other. Grabbing our gear, we walked into the middle dome, which served as a common area connecting the men's and the women's dome.

Inside were curious-looking beds with roll-tops, like desks used to have. With the top rolled up, the furniture served as a bed; rolled down, it served as a couch. Made up as beds now, inside the contraptions men were sleeping. I found out later that Mr. Black had a hand in designing just about everything on the property, including many of the buildings, the bed/couches, and the uniquely beautiful light fixtures that provided illumination for the inside and outside of all the structures. Not surprisingly, he also held many industrial patents, including a patent for vertical take-off airplane.

Inside the dome, trying not to disturb those already slumbering, George whispered, "Find a place. I'll see you in the morning." I found an empty bed and

unrolled my sleeping bag. Gazing through the skylight at the stars above the dome, absorbed in the quiet and the wonder of all that I had seen, I quickly went to sleep.

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We awoke the next morning too late to eat breakfast at the retreat. "It's OK. I want to show you the town," George said cheerfully. Not saying much to anyone, we got into the car and drove the 20 miles to Gaylord, a quaint town of 5000 with Swiss-style architecture. We returned to Song of the Morning in the early afternoon so George could show me around the retreat in daylight and introduce me to a few of the staff that he knew.

By this time I was getting eager to meet Mr. Black. I wondered: what will a yogi say? How will he act? More importantly, I thought, what will I say, how will I act? As we stood outside of the lodge-like building used for meditation, George said, "I'm going to a Kriya Yoga Review class here at four o'clock. You can't come, but why don't you walk around the property and I'll meet you back here in about an hour. We'll go to dinner together." The news that I couldn't attend the class was disheartening; the fact that apparently I wasn't soon to meet Yogacharya, disappointing.

As we stood chatting a few more moments, George suddenly said, "Here comes Mr. Black." I looked and saw striding effortlessly up the incline that led to the back of the lodge, the slender white-haired man I had seen in the photo. He was accompanied by a woman that seemed to be about his age. As they drew near, my friend said, "Hello Mr. Black. How are you?" Mr. Black stopped and took George's hand.

"Fine," he replied. "When did you get here?" George told him we arrived the night before at 2:00 a.m. Then George introduced me. As I shook Mr. Black's hand, he said to George, "Is he a Kriyaban?" (In other words, does he practice

Kriya yoga.) Feeling shy and a little awed, I found I could still speak and chirped in, "Not yet." After a few more words, Mr. Black, his companion, and George walked over to the lodge and went in. I was alone with a head full of questions and a heart full of new emotions. Not being able to attend the class with the rest, I felt not unlike a lost sheep. And while knowing next to nothing about Kriya yoga, simply by the way Mr. Black had talked about it, I knew that someday I wanted to be included in the inner circle of people who practiced the technique.

After the class, a vegetarian dinner was served at precisely five o'clock. All guests, members and staff, including Mr. Black, partook of the delicious fare. At eight o'clock after a pleasant walk in the twilight, we went to meditation in the lodge. Never having meditated in my life, George assured me I would be given all the information I needed. As the group grew quiet and as the lights were dimmed, all began to chant. I was unprepared for the sweet sounds of heart-felt devotional chanting that filled the air. After the chants, the leader provided brief meditation instructions. Then silence. Inspired by pictures of saints on the mantle and the warm, roaring fire, my mind quelled by the peaceful wilderness, the quiet and the solitude, I tried for the first time to look inside for the answers to the problems of my life. Encouraged by others meditating at this beautiful retreat, it made perfect sense to look inside, to meditate.

Thirty minutes of meditation, then a final chant. The lights were turned on; someone added more wood added to the fire. The group talked quietly. Mr. Black, rising from his seat, strolled around the room chatting amiably with everyone. Working his way over to my friend and me, he said to George, "Did you bring your wife?" George, who had been trying to convince his wife to come to Song of the Morning for some time, replied that she had not come. Then Mr. Black turned to me. "How about you. Are you married?" Having been agonizing

over my divorce before and during the trip, it was evidently not difficult to read my mind.

“Not anymore,” I replied.

“Well, whose fault is that?” he shot back, and strode away.

Implying that whatever had happened to me was my own fault, even if it was *karma* from a previous incarnation, this comment was my baptism in one of the truths (and the poignant way he expressed them!) Mr. Black used with those like me who came to him.

During our homeward journey from Song of the Morning the next day, George and I listened to football on the radio and with zest got back into our worldly ways. But when I arrived home, I discovered I had changed. I knew that what those at Song of the Morning were doing was what I wanted to do. I saw there people, not unlike myself, who were yogis, yet living and working in the world. I inquired about the Thursday meditation group at the YMCA and began attending. Feeling comfortable with the group, I sent for yoga lessons from Yogananda’s organization, Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles. The following June, Yogacharya initiated me into Kriya yoga. My spiritual quest had begun.

For 11 years Mr. Black guided my progress along the Kriya yoga path that his Master, Yogananda, brought to the West from India. At first when I visited Song of the Morning, I had many burning spiritual and philosophical questions. But I soon discovered that by merely being in Yogacharya’s presence, I received answers to all of them without asking. But when I went to him with a personal problem, Yogacharya never failed to give me what I needed and what I wanted, even if it included getting a metaphorical kick in the pants. His main approach was through wisdom, in addition to a good dose of humor, when appropriate.

Although Yogacharya said that he was just “a little Master,” being in that Presence that he personified had an undeniable uplifting affect.

A successful business man and millionaire by the age of 30 and at one time the largest single private land owner in Michigan, he was a practical individual who knew how to “be in the world but not of it,” an ideal example of Master Yogananda’s teachings. (I found out later that Yogacharya was one of three principle male disciples of Yogananda and was considered the most advanced.) He had spent much time with Yogananda during his lifetime and often told us wondrous stories of his experiences, including healings. Mr. Black taught yoga and meditation for over 25 years in his classes at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and initiated thousands into Kriya yoga.

Meeting Yogacharya Oliver changed me for the good and permanently. He was the first genuinely spiritual person I had ever met, showing me by his example that spirituality, yoga and meditation were real and practical. And perhaps most importantly, when it came to metaphysics, he knew the subject because he had experienced those things that others just read about.

Yogacharya passed away on September 16, 1989 at the age of 96. He had outlived his entire family, including all of his brothers and sisters, his wife, a son, and a daughter. Personally I have never felt a separation. His presence is as strong and as reassuring now as it was over the 11 years I knew him.

[Song of the Morning](#) retreat continues to operate. Located in the Pigeon River Forest country one hour south of the Mackinac Bridge in Michigan’s lower peninsula, it is open year round for personal retreats, group activities, and workshops.

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