
Give us a twirl!

IF YOU CAN'T SIT STILL, TAKE A SPIN WITH THE WHIRLING DERVISHES, SAYS WILL GETHIN

As a child, I loved spinning round in circles on the lawn trying to make myself dizzy. The trick was to get as high as possible without throwing up – a precarious balancing act. In later years, this penchant for a fix was channelled into alcohol and drugs. Much of my 20s danced by in an ephemeral wave of ecstasy euphoria, and when the drugs stopped working, I eloped to India, chasing a higher state of consciousness on a cocktail of free love, meditation and more drugs.

Hitting rock bottom and now squeaky clean since the age of 32, I've sought out fresh-air thrills and drug-free highs in many far-flung destinations – wrestling with Mongolian nomads, fire-walking in the Moroccan desert, dog-sledding in the Arctic and sound-journeying with Peruvian shamans. Perusing the loftier fringes of the UK festival circuit last summer, my cloud-nine trail curiously returned to its roots – spinning round in circles in a tent in Devon with some Sufi whirling

dervishes, chanting '*La ilaha ilallah*' ('There is no God but God').

The tradition of the whirling dervishes was founded by the celebrated 13th-century Sufi master and poet, Rumi. Thanks to the recent explosion of Rumi's popularity in the West (he's America's bestselling poet, would you believe?), Sufism – the mystical, liberal branch of Islam – is infiltrating popular culture. Rumi's mystical metaphors have serenaded Donna Karan's catwalks, Madonna has set his poems to music and Oliver Stone's son Sean wants to make a biopic.

Charismatic Sheikh Ahmad Dede oversees the daily whirling workshops at Devon's Tribe of Doris, a transcultural festival where you can learn to drum, dance and sing in an array of worldwide traditions. Resplendent in a tall dervish hat and black cloak, with a wispy beard and glasses, he has the air of a quixotic professor. 'When we whirl, we ask to receive divine love to selflessly give it away, to create a better world,' he elucidates. 'Imagine you're a baby held in your mother's arms.'

So I give it a go. Whirling with particular fervour, right hand raised heavenward to receive the love, I start to feel wonderfully wobbly and have to remind myself that this isn't the object of the dance. 'If you feel dizzy, let it be a warning,' Sheikh Ahmad booms. 'It means you're not concentrating! Focus again on this love connection between mother and child.'

Determined to experience the love power, I revolve all the more vigorously, envisioning myself a cosseted babe in arms. But then I'm daydreaming again – thoughts of supper, the pretty girl in my drumming class – before a tugging on my arms draws me back to consciousness. When I open my eyes, a bemused whirling dervish is standing before me in flowing white, clasping my arms. 'You are spinning the wrong way round,' he smiles politely. Ah, this may take some time... □

Sheikh Ahmad Dede will be performing and running whirling workshops at the Sunrise Celebration festival in Bruton, Somerset, from 21 to 24 June (sunrisecelebration.com).