

The Ashram Co-founder Cat Hedberg: How to Say “Yes!” to Life

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Melissa Biggs Bradley Hi, and welcome to Indagare’s Global Conversations, a podcast about how traveling the world shapes our lives and perspectives. I’m Melissa Biggs Bradley of Indagare, a company I founded on the belief that how you travel matters. I’m sitting down with some of the most inspiring and innovative people I’ve met while on the road. They’re activists and conservationists, designers and filmmakers, writers, chefs, and entrepreneurs. They will share stories about their travels and how they lead lives of passion and purpose. They inspire me, as I hope they will you. Welcome to the Conversation!

We all need people in life who show us the way. People who tell us what to do and what not to do. And when we listen, we're the better for it. My guest on this episode is Catharina Hedberg, also known as Cat. She has probably told more people exactly what to do one on one, and with bigger results than most people ever will. Cat or business partner, the late Anne-Marie Bennstrom founded the legendary Ashram near Malibu in 1974. Ashram means place of peace, but it was the world's first boot camp retreat, offering an intense physical and spiritual education. Mind you, when she started it, this was decades before most Americans had gotten into low calorie, high nutrient food and intense exercise. These two outgoing, adventurous women began to teach what they had grown up knowing in Sweden — the value of hiking and exercising and eating as close to nature as possible. It wasn't embraced by everyone at first, that's for sure. That was back when detox mostly referred to substance abuse recovery programs and boot camp was strictly a military term, and I will ask Cat about that time. Of course, today, the Ashram's pioneering approach and philosophy to diet, weight loss and wellness is so mainstream as to be practically, universally accepted. But Cat, who could have opened ten Ashram's the world over, is still fully committed to running just the single one in California with her unflinching passion and drive. And while she and the program have evolved some, she still gets those results by telling people exactly what to do. And we can all benefit by listening to her wisdom.

Cat, thank you for being here. I know you've got a gazillion things going on, so I'm just thrilled to be with you and to have you share some of your incredible wellness wisdom with us. So thank you. And let's start by having you tell us what lockdown has looked like for you.

Cat Herdberg Well, thank you, Melissa. I’m very happy to be on here because I so appreciate what you are doing to all of us that really love to travel, and that has been kind of stopped to do that for a while right now. Well, the lockdown has been interesting because I have done a lot of new Ashram adventures globally. And little did I know that I was going to re-open, kind of, the Ashram in Calabasas 46 years after I once opened it, because it is different, what you are doing right now because of protocols and all those things. And, you know, we were a little worried for a while because our program is based on a lot of hiking and all our trails in California were closed for so long and we were just aching because the nature was so beautiful this spring with flowers and rain and then smelled so good, but it was heavy fines to walk there. So we were just waiting and waiting and waiting. And I'm so happy to open a new Ashram in Calabasas. The building is the same, but there is a lot of protocols to follow for sure.

MBB Yeah, I would imagine. Now, Cat, can you talk a little bit about how your childhood in Sweden influenced your passion for creating and really cultivating in people an appreciation for a healthy mind, body and soul?

CH Yeah, well, you know, Swedish living has always been simple and to the point and no excess and no, you know, compromise. And I think that as a child or my whole life in Sweden, until I started to set up these travel places in Europe, it was being out in nature, walking. I was skiing to school until I was 16 because I was in a big town, but they there was lots of snow, so they never plowed the roads in time. So here we all ski to school, put our skis up on the wall, and went to school, you know, and we were always out every weekend with our little backpack and with an apple and hot cocoa. And we were always out in nature. And it was very simple living, but very earthy. And and, you know, the Ashram is built on simplicity, really. Out in nature to get your physical; the meditation and the yoga, which wasn't so much what we were doing in Sweden when I grew up, it was not really existing there. But I think that silent meditation or walking meditation — there's way too many ways of getting a meditation. Right? So even if you're out in nature and you're walking, that's a meditation. So I think I got that from from nature. I get my inspiration from nature. Absolutely. And that is what kind of gotten into the Ashram philosophy.

MBB So then how did you and Anne Marie decide to found the Ashram? How did that happen?

CH You know, I, I was, as I said, setting up some retreats or travel retreats in Europe, having a lot of fun after college and going to different countries. And what I did, I was taking travelers from Scandinavian countries down to, let's say, the Canary Islands. And I was working them out during the whole morning and in the afternoon they were free to do whatever. And it it become very, very popular. But I always had my eyes on America. And I read the Vogue magazine article about this Swedish woman who was over here. She was the director of the Golden Door Spa in San Diego. And she seemed to have very outrageous ideas. And my boyfriend at the time said, "Cat, you have other outrageous ideas about health. Why don't you go over there, learn a little bit what she is all about, and then come back and we do something here?" Well, I did, but I never came back. So, I stayed here because I love America. I love Americans. I love to work with Americans because they are very much like children. If you ask them to do something, they do it with a lot of enthusiasm. In Europe, especially the Scandinavian countries, you have to prove that what you're doing works. Otherwise, no one is going to sign up for it. So here it was like being in a sandbox and playing, you know, so I love that. So we decided we were going to start a little place in the mountains because in the early 70s there was nothing like we were thinking about doing in this country, which was to hike people, do yoga, do meditation, do breath work and feeding vegetarian food. And this was 1974. But we said we take a handful of people and it's like the ripples in the water. You throw a rock in then and then it ripples. And that's what we wanted to do. Get America going. Get America moving, you know, which wasn't, as I said at all what this was all about. So that was the original intent. And it still is actually, of the Ashram, this simple formula of just getting people moving. Nothing fancy just out there in nature.

MBB And so how has it...I mean, it sounds like the intention remains, as it has from the beginning. But are there ways that it has changed over the years?

CH Yes. Because, you know, when we started in 1970, people were in horrific shape. They weren't in good shape, you know, oh, my goodness. If they could walk up the driveway I had a good group, you know!

MBB That's amazing

CH It was not easy! We had had two small little hikes every day, and people were still detoxing and throwing up. And, you know, vegetarian food was just not where it was at. And of course Yoga then, no. Everyone that came from Texas did not want to eat vegetables and not do yoga. So it was a very interesting time and very challenging, I must say, because...because there was no support system in this, more than in my case, my passion and my pure intent...I was not going to waiver from the formula that I felt intuitively really could do a difference in someone's life. And we're doing the same now. But you were asking what the difference is. The difference is people are in better shape. People are used to, you know, vegan, vegetarian food or detoxing at least. People are great in Yoga and people are...so we have had to raise the bar on everything; on all our hikes, now we do long hikes, you know, and and the program is tough. You know, they have called the Ashram many things, but they have never called it easy.

MBB So can you describe what a typical day at the Ashram looks like?

CH Oh, okay. Well, it's...you wake up early and you have usually you have Yoga in the morning and then your breakfast. And then you got on a pretty long hike. Come back, have lunch, have a massage. Have a couple of classes whether it is, you know, weights or a barre class or anything like that. And, you know, and then you'll have a yoga meditation in the evening. And then you have been there and then you have some kind of activity, maybe a sound bath or a deep meditation or breathing class or something in the evening. This, you know, at the Ashram is not for everyone. That's for sure. It is for someone that that don't want to have a Four Seasons experience; more of a, you know, it's simple kind of approach and, but anyone can make it if they have the right attitude. If they say, I can do this, you know, we don't book people online. We talk to everyone that comes in. So we don't...it serves both us and them. So anyone can do it.

MBB And I mean, you mentioned, it was not an easy thing to get people to embrace what you knew they needed to do to have an improved physical and mental sort of existence. And yet and there are legendary stories about toxic Tuesday, for instance, when the detox starts happening and about, you know, people who don't follow the program being asked to leave. So how did you manage to have to be an enforcer in a situation where people are signing up to go and you want them to want to come back?

CH Are you meaning the or now?

MBB Both. I mean, well, and if it's different, I'd love to hear how it's different.

CH Yeah. Well, you know, in the beginning, again, it was so...I kind of was sitting with a with a phone book and said, "do you want to come to a retreat for \$500?" And the ones that came the first year will never come back because they were guinea pigs, you know, like how much can we hike them on the glass of orange juice in those days? Because the whole consciousness then was how much weight can I lose? How many inches? That was the, you know, what people were at in their consciousness. And they're both good and bad because of course, we got the whole crew of the entertainment business because in between movies, they needed to lose weight. So everything was on losing weight at that time, you know. But there is a funny story, I think, because in 1974, because of these entertainment personalities that came on, there was a famous editor from a very well-known magazine that came out and had heard about this, and I'll never forget her words because she said to me, "Cat, I cannot write about you because you're hiking people, you're doing vegetarian food, you're doing yoga with people. You're totally outrageous. It's never going to work. And Medicare is not going

to do this. And I can't write about you." So she didn't and I never forget that. And now, 46 years later, yay! Here we are.

MBB The whole world is caught up.

CH Well, two years later, she came back and did a six page spread in this great magazine. And then I think that put us on the map. So after that, all the magazines, like always — I love that in this country — that when something new, when exciting, is...it just this exciting for everyone. I love that. So we had a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of magazines coming out because it was new, it was outrageous, it was crazy. And the saying was, how can they...you know, you're hiking 10 miles on a carrot and, you know, and then it was like fishing stories. It becomes bigger and bigger. So it was, it was fun times, those days. Nowadays, you know, and I saw a big change after, you know, 10 years ago. People are starting to wanting to be more quiet. That's why the trend of pilates and yoga and meditation has come in and not so much, you know, Taibo or exercise classes, you know, like we were doing in the 70s. It isn't there anymore. People are going into a more of an inner space because everyone needs it in these chaotic times. And it has been a big change. So, you know, we have upped that part of our program and still working people out because, you know, lot of people still want to do...kind of firm up. Especially now. I think we all have that COVID "15" or COVID "20" on us!

MBB But it's interesting, Cat, because you said in the 1970s, you had to wake up America. And in some ways, what you're commenting on is now you, you've got to help slow down America or center Americans. And that's a response, probably in both cases, to the times that you're dealing with. And it's not even you know, it's you driving the change, so much is recognizing what's happened out in society and then adapting to respond.

CH That's exactly right. Exactly right. You know, you always have to be a little bit ahead of the game. And I think the Ashram is. If people need to work out more, we're raising the bar. If people need to have more spiritual input, we supply that, you know. And definitely now, intuitively, I feel it is a very important time and we will have to strengthen them on the inside as well as on the outside. This is a new world. We have to, you know, enforce the positive and we have to look at this as a new world and get in tune with it, because that's all we can do. And and I think it's an interesting time because it opens up doors to many things that we took for granted before. I think it's very interesting, where we are in ourselves and what we can pull out of our hats to make it okay through these times, and I, myself, feel that the more positive we can stay within our own beings, the better it is. That doesn't mean that a day when you wake up and said, "this sucks." You know, that's okay, too. But to turn that in to "okay, I don't feel great about this, but what can I do to strengthen the positive within me?" Even if it's just something little that you appreciate. I think that's where we're going right now. We've got to look at what, what we have as blessings around us. It might just be small things, but we've got to look at it because the past is not where we can live anymore. It's gone. Forget it. The future, we don't know anything about. So we might as well stay in the now and make it really a positive experience. I really need to underline that for myself as well as everyone that, you know, is coming into the Ashram. I want to...we're going to strengthen with love and care and all those things. When you get the strength back, we all need the strength back, you know?

MBB Yeah. And it's interesting that you say that, Cat, because when I first was hearing about the Ashram from people years ago who were the ones who were desperate — you know, over the years, everyone's been desperate to get in — but people, you know, initially I heard about toxic Tuesday and incredibly, incredibly hard workouts and how they were starved and worked out. And it sounded like a torture in a way. And yet there were people who were obsessed with going every single year and said, you know, "I have to go

because it's what resets me." And they weren't actually talking about the physical reset. One friend said to me, you know, in trying to understand it she said, "it is literally like the high that you get after an hour of yoga where you feel that you've returned to yourself. I go to the Ashram and I get that feeling and I can hold on to it for five months at a time." And what that said to me was she's she's figured out how to center herself or find herself again through the program, and how you do it is a mix of all of those things. But I think that's why it is so important to people. It's, you know, maybe the movie stars have to go and lose the weight. But for a lot of people, it's it's such a deeper renewal that you offer. And and I'm curious as to what you think the magic to that is, because that can't be said of most health retreats.

CH No, it's you know, that's I think where we are different from others. I always say, you know, they have copied our program. They have copied whatever we do and they have put it in beautiful places all over the world, which is great. But one thing they never can copy, really, is the soul and the spirit of the Ashram, and that is what we are known for. And that comes from the staff. That comes from the staff that has been with me for decades; very special individuals, because they come from a place of total love. They come from a place from their heart. I never hire anyone from their resume. I don't care about resumes. I care about, if they come from their heart, because if they do, then they are hired because you can't teach someone to come from that place. You can teach them everything else, that is a different story. But if they come from here, then I know that they fit in to the Ashram because all I want to do is to take care of the people that come in there. That's my passion. That's what I want the Ashram to represent; someone like your friend that said, I feel, you know, that for months. That is what gets to my heart, when someone really gets it like that.

MBB And how do you cultivate that kind of...obviously, you hire people that can care. But then how is it that they and you can make the small groups connect as well? Because part of what happens is in the bonding experience.

CH Yes. Well, you know, the reason, one reason is and...that's why you don't really see and the other retreats taking so few people, because business wise, it isn't that grand of an idea. But people wise, it's a great idea to take a smaller group because it becomes a very intimate situation in the sense of "we're in the same boat, we're rowing, we're helping each other, we're going through this." People cry on the mountain and they throw their wedding rings off the cliffs, you know, and they go to the next level in themselves and they're are great, great friendships that have been formed through an experience like this because, you know, no one ever wears makeup; they all go around in our red sweat suits and Ashram big tee shirts so that everything is too big again, you know, but it's like a comfort between everyone. So it becomes a friendship. And I think that this one reason why, you know, it becomes such a very close experience. And also everyone, you know, likes the staff. So, as I said, the staff has been there so long so when people come back to the Ashram, which you mentioned, you know, they come a lot, it's like coming home. They recognize the staff. They actually know the program. And God forbid that I do any changes to the program because they're going to get on me. "Don't change that salad! We love that salad!" That's so...you know. Dare I say, "oh, let's change the breakfast." No, no, no; they want the same thing. It doesn't matter if they've been there 50 times. So it's like coming home, I think. And what is interesting, Melissa, is it's 46 years of amazing, beautiful, strong, non- compromise loving energy that surrounds the Ashram. So when you...and it's very simple. The Ashram is a very simple; it's a house, you know, with rooms. And where you come in through the front door, you feel that energy and that also seals the group together. It's like "Ahh, I'm in the safe space."

MBB I would imagine that over the years you've probably had people who've said, I want to buy this or brand this or do different things and that, you know how you have to keep the magic.

CH Yeah, that's true. No, I would not do that. You know, this is my passion. This is my life. And I made a promise to myself early on that I would never open another Ashram like this because I'm not the businesswoman, per se. I'm a people person. And that's where my strength is. I could have 20 Ashrams all over the place. I wouldn't want them because I want to connect with the people. So your next question will probably be, well, you have opened places in other countries. And I'm a Viking explorer, love to travel. So I think I did this because of selfishness, to start with, you know. And I wanted to go to places where I could make a difference. So 2004, we opened the Mallorca program. And on Mallorca, which is an island in Spain, in Mallorca, there was no Yoga. There was no massages. There was hiking and mountains are so great. And that's one reason that they went there. But there was nothing. Nothing else. There wasn't many tourists except a few villages or a few towns. And so I brought everyone over. I brought yoga teachers from here. I brought a massage therapist from my staff, everyone over. And so now, of course, it's full, the massage therapist and everything. So, you know, we start something where we are, we start it, we get it going, we'll get it brewing and we get the interest going. And, but I, yes, I do it for myself, but I also do it for my staff because I want them to be able to experience something different because they have been at the Ashram here in California for so long, and I allowed them to take their families and run the programs over there. And, you know, and we set them all up with houses and whatever. So their families can be there while the program goes on, then it's a great experience for them, too. And I love that they can take care of something and represent the Ashram outside of California. And Iceland, of course, of course, we had to choose the east coast of Iceland that there's nothing, no nothing, nothing, nothing over there. So that was my real Viking spirit. But we found a beautiful little place that one of our...two sisters, Icelandic sisters have a hotel on this east coast. So we're having that for our adventures. And the mountains are amazing and there are no trails and we have, you know, an amazing Icelandic staff. So the whole idea about opening these things is to introduce our guests to a different culture also. Of course, we get a lot of Europeans coming to Spain, but for the Americans, I want to introduce the culture. So in Mallorca, you know, you have Mallorcan food, vegetarian Mallorcan food, and fresh squeezed orange juice for snacks when we get [indistinguishable] and a farm that has oranges, you know, and Spanish music. And in Iceland you have Icelandic trout. That's the only place I serve fish if someone wants to, because it's fished out of the lake on our property. And we have a storyteller come in and talk about the little gnomes and the fairies and all that, that this...and the hidden people that are all so popular in Iceland. So, you know, I'm introducing different things for our guests than that. And I love it.

MBB That sounds so amazing. I am going to Mallorca with you next June, I promise. So when you want to go away, when you want to escape and you're not taking people on a hike someplace, what are the places that you like to travel to?

CH If I only have a day, I go in the mountains and restore my soul, with the sun in my face and the mountains around me. That's it. But, if I can fly, which I love to go to places where there is not a lot of tourists. So I've kind of been ahead of the curve with a lot of that; going to Bhutan at a time when it just opened up. I just came back from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, you know. So I'm trying to...I love to go where there is not too much tourists. I don't like big cities. But I like to go and mingle with the regional people, right? And that's my passion. So that is really interesting right now. I'm looking up in the sky and saying, "is there a plane going anywhere? I'm going to be on it."

MBB And what were your impressions of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan?

CH Very interesting. Very interesting. Especially Kyrgyzstan. Have you been?

MBB No.

CH It's very interesting. I must say. It's way back in time. Still beautiful, of course. Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan with their amazing buildings.

MBB Yes. There I've been. And they are spectacular. The architecture.

CH Kyrgyzstan is gorgeous and totally untouched. It was a funny experience there because I, always wherever I go, I write postcards to my granddaughter. And I was looking everywhere in Kyrgyzstan for a postcard, in every little store and grocery store and there were no postcards. And I thought, "isn't this strange? Why is there no postcard?" And then it struck me that there are no tourists here. So why would they have postcards? They don't even know what post cards are. So I love that. Now that, I love!

MBB And as an avid traveler with the Viking Spirit, I've got to know, what are the essentials that you have in your bag? Always.

CH My absolute essential is a big Louis Vuitton scarf silk, cashmere, scarf in the most outrageous orange, that I can sweep around me at all times. That's my go to. And, you know, I, I've, I'm known to travel with just a carry on no matter where I go. So it involves hiking shoes, hiking pants and and a couple of tee shirts and something for me that is somewhat nice. And, you know, we don't need much. Right?

MBB We really don't. I'm an I'm a committed carry on packer, too. And I love that your scarf is Louis Vuitton, which actually began as a luggage maker. So switching gears a bit to your latest project, what was it that made you finally decide to author a cookbook because you did that in 2018? And I'm curious to know what made you decide which recipes to include and what it was like to undertake that kind of a project?

CH Well, that was interesting, Melissa, because I can't even boil an egg. So we, had a we have a guest, a good friend. Her name is Price Erana, and she is actually the producer of this book and she was a guest and she came down the mountain one day and she said, "Cat, you have to do a cookbook!" So I started laughing. I said, "no way a cookbook. I am not doing any cookbook. Thank you very much. If I do any book, I'm going to write about the evolution of health and wellness that I've seen through the years from the early 70s, that's what I want to write about. I'm not going to write the cook book. Are you kidding? Forget it. Don't even talk to me about it." Well, a couple of months later, here she comes again. She said, "Cat, we have to do a cookbook because the publisher Assouline wants to do your cookbook." I said, "Assouline? Are you crazy? You know, they only do these fancy, beautiful coffee table books. Right?" And, but intuitively, I felt such an affinity with Assouline and I don't know anything about them, but I felt the family vibe. And later on I knew I heard it was a family company. And I said to Price, "why would they want to do our book?" And she said, "because they feel you are genuine, you are no compromise and you they just want to do it with you because you are the original people that started this." I said, "okay, we're doing a cookbook." So then we got, you know, again, I can't write recipes. Forget it. So our wonderful chef Susie Buranan put together, they said, give us a hundred recipes and we will choose 50. Well, we sent in 100 recipes and they chose 100 because they got so turned on by all the wonderful things that Susie came up with. So now we have a cookbook. And then I, I said I will write the introduction because only I know...I wanted this to be something if people couldn't come to the Ashram perse, I wanted them to have a little feeling of what the Ashram was if they had the book in the hand. So it's not just the recipes. There are some, you know, sayings and and the introduction I wrote, which

actually I'm very proud of because it says really what the Ashram is all about. And so people have a little piece of the Ashram in their home if they have that book, you know? So it has been, it has been a fun, fun, fun journey with that book because it became very popular and I love how it came out.

MBB Cat, I have to ask you, because you have such a great attitude and not just about the book, but about, about how you face everything, and this has obviously been a tough time for everybody, this period of COVID. What are the things that you look to for, sort of, inspiration when times are tough?

CH That's a good question. You know, for me, I...we talked a little bit about that before. I got tested in myself, I can deny that. I have always been taking the positive route in everything that I do. It's a choice, right? If you get the flat tire, you either kick the tire or you call someone to fix it. So there is a choice in life. And I think our attitude is what is the most important. I've always taken the positive out. And when everything is fine and dandy, it's easy to take the positive route. And I was stumbling a little bit with that during COVID because I am such a free spirit. I need to have air under my wings. I don't need, like, restrictions. If I want to go somewhere, I want to go. If I need, want to have a flight that goes anywhere, I'm on it. So it was, it was a little bit of a shift for me, I must say. But ultimately, I do choose the positive route, and also and we talked about that a little bit: the now. Let's stay in the now and that's what I've said, you know, let's stay and be thankful for what we have. It's not about money or anything right now. It is about the relationship we have with ourselves and the attitude we have with ourselves and our environment and also towards others. You know, family comes in handy. You know, it's these heart connections that we should look into a little more, that we bypass too much in our other lives, in the past because there were so many distractions. But I think all of us now can sit back and said, "wow, you know, I'm really blessed because I have maybe just the smallest thing that I can appreciate more." And I think in my life, I really try to, you know, turn everything into a positive experience. That's where I'm going. I'm not going anywhere else.

MBB My guest in the next episode is also no stranger of staying in what Cat describes as "the here and now," where a holistic approach to wellness allows us to be a healthier, more well-balanced version of ourselves. Dr. Cindy Geyer is the longtime medical director at Canyon Ranch's Berkshire's location. She's been called the gut guru for her discourses on digestion. But really, she's one of the best distillers and explainers of medical research and the latest trends in the world of nutrition that I've ever met. Even if you're familiar with terms like Keto, flexitarian and volumetrics, you'll want to tune in to listen to Cindy cut through the hype and get to the truth about, among other things, meaningful, smart, long lasting weight loss.

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