

Twilight in America

One morning I was reading 'a treasury of sublime instructions' from a high Tibetan lama. America contains the symbol 'Ah', which sounds the unborn nature of truth. It's also the symbol at the throat chakra, colored red. Sometimes when I sit and visualize the colors white, red and blue according to my Buddhist practice, I think of the American flag and how uncanny it is that they are the same. I sit and pray for liberation from physical, verbal and mental afflictions, as the country I was born into is rocking itself into the hell realm by way of its own blood soaked actions.

There are more than 5 billion humans on the planet now and few study the Buddhist dharma. According to Buddhist scriptures, in contemplating the sufferings of cyclic life in general, they can be broken down into six sufferings. Life is uncertain. We can never find a sense of satisfaction. We have to shed our bodies over and over again. We are born over and over again. What goes up must come down.

I felt bad at lunch the other day as a friend told me about a CEO of a well-known movie studio and how much he makes a day; how much he spends to redecorate his office that he doesn't use. How he also had a quadruple by pass. And my mind flashes abruptly to begging bowls penetrating the stone fences of India. \$10,000 a day to sit in a soft malleable chair and bark at your employees could feed the whole of an Indian town for half a year! "It's out of whack", she said. Yet there's no visible awareness of cyclic existence and how it all goes round and round. You reap what you sow. And so...and so...

We live in a land of Costcos, of sterilized supermarkets with pasturized milk, genetically engineered beef, plastic containers, rubber gloves. The supermarkets here don't smell. They freeze you. You should probably wear a ski suit to shop at Ralphs or Vons. We drive Hummers to prevent death. We pull the skin taught on our faces to avoid looking at the aging process. We think we can defy death. We think that our minds are so powerful. But the mind that is contaminated is only as powerful as its contaminates. It can't see. It can only see through its own dirty lens.

It's just that with Hummers and Costcos we've developed a battleground we think we can win on. We can drive over death. Eat him up and liposuction him out of our bodies. We can kill some people in a foreign land and not feel. Not feel. That's it. I put my flag on my Hummer and I feel something else. Pride invasion.

I watch TV and see talking shriveled up American men in suits. I think of the invention of the suit and tie. Clothing symbols of achievement. Wow. We became stiff. Old and Gaspung, I watch Rumsfeld deliver a speech on TV. He can hardly get a breath. They are short heaves and his chest seems hard and I think, "that man is suffering so much". And has no idea. As a yoga teacher, I see the physical structural ailments much more now. The caved in chest, the sagging shoulders, the color of the skin. Not even a suit or a tummy tuck can hide what's really going on.

Human birth is precious and rare. It is often said that the birth of a human is more rare than a blind turtle that swims in the ocean and only surfaces every hundred years, putting its head through a golden hoop which has been tossed around on the waves and driven by wind. By contrast, the Buddha taught that the number of beings in hell equals the number of atomic particles in the galaxy. Each human being has the capacity to reach nirvana (liberation from all mental afflictions), or Buddhahood (total enlightenment for the sake of all beings) from here. In other words, you have the capacity to transform the awful-ness in you and around you and reach for something beautiful, pain free, for the sake of all beings, hell, animal, hungry ghost, semi-god, god as well as human. But as one of my teachers lamented in retreat, the Buddha taught the 8 fold path, the way out, over 2,500 years ago and still people haven't learned, still they are doing the same awful things.

Some say it's enough to notice the breath. Accept the breath. But there's more. Understand how you got to be breathing in the first place. Understand how we all breath. How interdependent our breath is. Your Republican breath out is my breath in. It may or may not kill me. It's not about the Republican breath then, is it? Think about this. Use it as a koan, traverse the breath and those streets. See the swaying masses on the streets writhing, darting. See Bush breathing. And all those evangelicals and those soldiers in Iraq. And know as well that your last breath is your death at this juncture. Your last breath in this life is the last breath of countless beings, countless times. And the beginning of another cycle of life and breath. Then, how the red might be the blood you're swimming in or the thin streak in the sky of a new beautiful dawn, the white might be the frozen ice of the coldest hell or the most intense stream of bliss, and how the blue might be the darkest pool of hot tar or the lapis lazuli sky of the Pure land.

Oh say can you see? By the dawns' early light...what so proudly we hail as the twilight's last gleaming?

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