

Angels Unawares

I

One bending low with load of life -
That meant no joy, but suffering harsh and hard -
And wending on his way through dark and dismal paths
Without a flash of light from brain or heart
To give a moment's cheer, till the line
That marks out pain from pleasure, death from life,
And good from what is evil was well-nigh wiped from sight,
Saw, one blessed night, a faint but beautiful ray of light
Descend to him. He knew not what or where from,
But called it God and worshipped.
Hope, an utter stranger, came to him and spread
Through all his parts, and life to him meant more
Than he could ever dream and covered all he knew,
Nay, peeped beyond his world. The Sages
Winked, and smiled, and called it "superstition".
But he did feel its power and peace
And gently answered back -
"O Blessed Superstition! "

II

One drunk with wine of wealth and power
And health to enjoy them both, whirled on
His maddening course, till the earth, he thought,
Was made for him, his pleasure-garden, and man,
The crawling worm, was made to find him sport,
Till the thousand lights of joy, with pleasure fed,
That flickered day and night before his eyes,
With constant change of colours, began to blur
His sight, and cloy his senses; till selfishness,
Like a horny growth, had spread all o' er his heart;
And pleasure meant to him no more than pain,
Bereft of feeling; and life in the sense,
So joyful, precious once, a rotting corpse between his arms,
Which he forsooth would shun, but more he tried, the more
It clung to him; and wished, with frenzied brain,
A thousand forms of death, but quailed before the charm,
Then sorrow came - and Wealth and Power went -
And made him kinship find with all the human race
In groans and tears, and though his friends would laugh,
His lips would speak in grateful accents -
"O Blessed Misery! "

III

One born with healthy frame - but not of will
That can resist emotions deep and strong,
Nor impulse throw, surcharged with potent strength -

Dhyāna

Newsletter -
Zentrum for
Zen-Buddhismus

Winter 2003

Contents:
"Angels Unawares"..1
Needs and Wants.....2
Don't Panic.....4
Catch your breath.....6

And just the sort that pass as good and kind,
 Beheld that he was safe, whilst others long
 And vain did struggle ' gainst the surging waves.
 Till, morbid grown, his mind could see, like flies
 That seek the putrid part, but what was bad.
 Then Fortune smiled on him, and his foot slipped.
 That ope' d his eyes for e' er, and made him find
 That stones and trees ne' er break the law,
 But stones and trees remain; that man alone
 Is blest with power to fight and conquer Fate,
 Transcending bounds and laws.
 From him his passive nature fell, and life appeared
 As broad and new, and broader, newer grew,
 Till light ahead began to break, and glimpse of That
 Where Peace Eternal dwells - yet one can only reach
 By wading through the sea of struggles - courage-giving, came.
 Then looking back on all that made him kin
 To stocks and stones, and on to what the world
 Had shunned him for, his fall, he blessed the fall,
 And with a joyful heart, declared it -
 "Blessed Sin!"

"Angels Unawares" written by Swami Vivekananda -1898.09.01
 (www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_4/vol_4_frame.htm)



Needs and Wants

The holiday season of giving and receiving (and returning) gifts and greetings is upon us. Our minds turn to the making of mental, if not written lists, of things to buy or make as gifts for those near to us.

The shops and markets cooperate with our efforts by displaying their newest items in a festive atmosphere accompanied by the requisite playing of Bing Crosby' s White Christmas and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.

The news media is full of advertising extolling the virtues of this over that. My eyes are drawn to the ads displaying the newest electronic gadgetry. My latent desire for things photographic is now awake. The eyes scan the ads for news of the latest hi-end digital camera offerings. I stoke the fire of my desire as I read about the newest offering from Sony. And what a fine camera it is. Small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, titanium housing, Carl Zeiss lens, 23mm to 300mm optical zoom and on and on. It is everything I have always *wanted*.

What an interesting word, this word "wanted".

As children, we learned quickly that just because we "wanted" some-thing didn' t mean that our parents were disposed to let us have that "wanted" some-thing. Wanting some-thing according to society' s rules, at the time, was equated with being selfish. Thinking only of ones self. Our parents, with the help of the teachers at school, spent a good deal of time trying to get that idea across. Being to deeply stuck in my "wanting", I missed the point of most of what they were saying. One thing I did learn was not to use the word "want".

But “wanting” is not to be denied by simply dropping the word from one’s vocabulary. The word “want”, synonymous with “to desire”, will always find another means of expression. It will, with the willing assistance of the rational mind transmute itself into the word “need”. Now to transmute the word “want” into “need” all I have to do is create a logic supporting the necessity of the wanted-thing to my continuing existence on this planet. It then becomes something I “need”. Once it is something I “need”, and no longer just “want”, my way is clear, socially and psychologically, to pursue the means to satisfy my desire.

The satisfying of human desire is the sole basis for advertising. The sole goal of marketing is the transformation of “wants” into “needs”. Every professional saleswoman knows that if her customer is convinced he needs something and not just wants it, a sale is assured. Her job is to help her customer with the transmutation of a “want” into a “need”. We all like to be sold something by someone who’s words unlock desire and systematically clothe it in the word “need”. All trace of “want” is convincingly covered over with the whole-hearted assistance of my-self.

Have I been fooled again? Of course, I have because the “real” salesman is sitting inside of me. The external saleswoman was clever enough to be in full resonance with him. The desire was fulfilled.

In the previous newsletter we talked about happiness. And that our desire to be happy is our ultimate goal. It was also said that the normal man tries to satisfy this desire for happiness with the objects of this world until she discovers the impossibility of the task. She discovers the impossibility of the task only after having sat down, quieted her rational mind and experienced a state of peace that no amount of normal activity could produce for any length of time. She finds that the more often she does sit down, the longer and more profound her quiet becomes. As a result of this quiet, her insight, unfettered by the noise of the normal mind, shines through.

What may her insight, her *voice in the silence* whisper to her in answer to the questions, “what are wants?, what are needs? How can I know the difference? It may whisper, in a form or fashion that is immediately and fully understandable to her that;

Today, while taking a leisurely walk in the city,
you stopped for lunch because you were hungry.

Later, on the same city walk, you stopped for a coffee and a piece of pie.

Lunch fulfilled a need.
Coffee and pie fulfilled a want.

Over time, these insights, cultivated by further meditation begin to manifest in the daily life of our normal man. She finds, for instance, her physical state changing as her attitude toward food, work, rest and sleep begins to change. She finds that she has begun to question her “need” for some of the foods in her diet. She is beginning to master her “appetite”, not only for food, but for other, so-called, bodily needs. The distinction between what a mind-need is and what the body-need becomes sharper. The body responds to this release of mind-tyranny by becoming healthful and natural.

Through continued meditation our normal man is able to observe the bubbles of desire rising up from the depths of her consciousness. The bubbles pop in the light of her introspection and she realizes for herself the difference between need and want.

Hitting Bottom

Four years ago, I began a meditation practice in order to relieve some of the chaos in my life. As the practice developed my life changed. I found that the more I practiced, the more I was able to deal with the day to day happenings of my life. It's not that the problems disappeared, it was that I was a little more stable, a little more centered. I was able to look at things from a different point of view. I was like a surfer, riding the wave of daily life using the energy of the wave rather than fighting it. That is, until six months ago when I hit a huge wave. A Tsunami !

Six months ago, I lost my job of long standing. The poor economic climate was the cause. I was not terribly surprised but not quite unworried. There were a lot of people out there looking for work. I put my worry aside and began to look in earnest for new work. It was a time-consuming and nerve-wracking effort. The expectation of finding work in my chosen field was shattered early on. I was either 'to qualified' or 'to little qualified'.

Things were becoming complex. Should I re-train? Should I hold on to my dream and continue on searching? Should I switch to a totally different line of work? Am I getting too old for this kind of work? Can I live on less money? I began to lose my balance and become afraid that I was not employable. I was no longer riding the wave. I was crashing headlong into it.

I fell back into my old behavioral patterns. I was now a surfer without a surfboard. My worry about my inability to find new work mounted. My sleeping and eating patterns were irregular. The incessant mental pull to find new work was now a compulsion. I stopped meditating because I had no time for it. Friends tried to help but I pushed them away. Soon I was alone in my self-centered brooding, living in hell, refusing all suggestion of help. Anger began to overtake me. I lost my perspective. I was no longer able to discriminate between what-is and what-is-not. I was no longer surfing life. I was no longer the master of the wave. The wave had mastered me and had pulled me under. Caught in the whirlpool of my anger, my cries for help were heard by others as expressions of anger. I was now convinced that "no one understands me". The downward spiral of mental depression tightened as now my health slowly gave way. I was more subject to colds and other bronchial inflammations. My ever increasing intake of antacids and headache tablets was making the local pharmacist happy.

Many times, in the course of my downward spiral, I had thoughts of stopping whatever it was that was driving me downwards. The remembrance of my past sojourns into hell were strong and I did not wish to repeat them again. But alas, the will to reverse the spiral was weak and so the journey downward continued virtually unabated. There were still perverse satisfactions to be found in this self-created hell. I had not yet 'hit bottom'.

I knew that somewhere there was a bottom. I knew this because I have been there many times in the past. For me, a bottom is near when something inside,

surveying the carnage of my latest escapade and no longer being able to bear the pain of it, says “this is bullshit, no more, no more, fini”. And the voice that says it is one that cannot be denied.

The bottoms are always in the same place. They are in the place of “surrender”. A place where I finally just give up fighting to have it “my way”. A place where I “give up”, unconditionally, without reservation, to the reality of what is in front of me and not to remain wallowing in the reality of my fantasies.

Unfortunately, many times, I lose sight of reality. It always comes as a result of neglecting my meditation practice. When I neglect my meditation practice the reality of my fantasies takes control of me and that’s when the problems begin. I can no longer discriminate between reality and fantasy. My perceptions take on the color of “my world.”

In retrospect, I could have avoided a lot of my journeys to hell by staying with my meditation practice. I know that if I had been more consequent with my practice, I would have not given it up at the first sign of “trouble” in my life. I would not have fallen so quickly into habitual behaviors. I would have had more trust in my inner self. But “in the heat of battle”, I forget to remember the one lifeline that could pull me out of the whirlpool and down I go. My old habits are stronger than my meditation habit.

The story has a happy ending. I still don’t have a job. I am still looking for work. But my life is slowly coming back into order again. Sleeping and eating patterns are slowly re-emerging. I have begun my meditation practice again. It seems to be a long road back to regain any stillness. I know it will return. I have been through this so many times before.

(P.S. I read this the other day. The Buddha had a way of saying things :-)

“Therefore, be ye lamps unto yourselves, be a refuge to yourselves. Hold fast to Truth as a lamp; hold fast to the truth as a refuge. Look not for a refuge in anyone beside yourselves. And those, who shall be a lamp unto themselves, shall betake themselves to no external refuge, but holding fast to the Truth as their lamp, and holding fast to the Truth as their refuge, they shall reach the topmost height.”



Catch your breath

Yes, literally, catch your breath. Catch it in your mind. Direct your undivided attention to it. Observe it, become acquainted with it. Is it regular or choppy? Is the inhale and the exhale in balance? Is it noisy? How long is the inhale? How long is the exhale? How many breaths occur each minute? How often do I ask myself these questions.? How knowledgeable am I about the workings of this body?

For the normal man, these questions never come into play. She is quite content to pass her years without a thought of the breath until it begins to falter due to illness or stress. Witness the fact that the normal man breathes at a rate of 15 to 18 times per minute. Think about that for a minute. At 15 breaths/minute, one breathing cycle is 4 seconds. Normally the in-breath is quicker than the out-breath, so of this 4 seconds, something less than 2 seconds is the length of the in-breath. How much air, does one inhale in 2 seconds or less?

The average lung capacity is 3.5 l of air. At the "normal" breathing rate of 15 breaths/minute, one inhales approximately 500ml of air. That is, 86% of the available lung capacity is not being used. Why not? The obvious answer is, 'it is not possible to inhale any more air, at the rate you are pumping it in and out of your lungs. The normal breathing pattern uses only the middle 1/3 of the lungs. One has effectively disabled 2/3 of one' s lung capacity In other words, one is slowly strangling oneself to death, unconsciously.

Our breath goes through changes in the course of a lifetime. As children our breathing patterns were quite more "natural." We used a significantly greater percentage of our lung capacity. The breath being intimately connected to the mind reflected the untroubled state of the mind of a child.

As we grew older, our breath took the shape of our lifestyle. Our lifestyle took the shape of our mental concepts of who or what I thought 'i am". Our mental concepts of who 'i am" are based in strong measure on what society dictates to be normal at the moment. The only word that comes to mind for today' s society is "stressful". Wouldn' t you agree?

Each time one is in a perceived stressful situation the body responds with its instinctive defense mechanism. Adrenalin is released into the bloodstream. The heart begins to beat faster . The breathing rate increases and the breath becomes shallower. Muscles tense. The senses are at full alert. The thinking faculty is short-circuited. This process, in varying degrees of intensity, occurs each time I am "stressed." Each time I experience stress and respond with this instinctive behavior I re-enforce the pattern of this behavior . As if it wasn' t strong enough already.

The process of preparing the body to meet outside danger is necessary if the body is to survive. It has nothing to do with thought and all to do with physical action. As human beings, we all have this habit karmically preserved from a time when it was necessary to defend the physical body, animal or human, from external danger. For people in many societies, in this time, that external danger has been lessened. That does not mean that this deeply rooted habit has been lessened. It lies dormant. It waits for a call to arms.

The ego, wedded to the world of the senses, willingly incorporates any habit that will make its job easier and its continued existence un-threatened . High on the

list of its available resources are the karmic seeds for self-preservation of the physical body. In its ignorance of anything other than itself, the ego brings forward this behavior at times of perceived danger to itself. In an interesting display of ignorance, the ego, by using these karmic seeds of self preservation, has assured its own demise by destroying the physical body.

The ego, many times, is aware of the negative effect these self-preservation methods have on the physical body. To counter any complaints from a not totally subservient intellect, it prescribes ‘anti-stress’ medication from the current societally approved over-the-counter and under-the-counter drug sources.

One could try the following exercise instead of popping a pill.

1. Read this line one word at a time as you **inhale** your breath.
2. Read this line one word at a time as you **exhale** your breath.

Now apply this technique to the reading of the poem at the beginning of this newsletter. Read slowly and with total attention. The mind, now focussed on the task of reading, is more centered and the breath will follow suit.

Of course, when employing this practice, one must be very careful what one chooses to read. Applying this technique to the reading of anything that is emotionally stirring will produce the opposite effect.

We began this article by describing some of the physical aspects of breath and then proceeded to delineate the involvement of ego in determining the constitution of the breath. We could, at this point conclude by saying that if one watches one's breath on a regular basis one can learn how to recognize the oncoming stress and take some prophylactic action. And for the normal man that may be sufficient. She would have a usable tool to help her realign her responses to her ‘stress.’ Being unaware of any other choices, she could assume ‘stress is a fact of life, and facts cannot be changed, but I now have a tool to help keep it at bay.’

From the perspective of someone that has experienced the mental victory over a deep seated habit this point-of-view is unacceptable. The student of the Self, during her quiet meditation has begun to realize that the development of a long, slow, rhythmic breath is essential to her deepening practice. It is a discovery that awaits all of us.

Catch your breath