

“The Broom Must Touch the Dust”:

What Buddhism teaches me about living every day

Delivered by Terry Ward on August 12, 2012

1.

*The sun will come out tomorrow
Bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow,
There'll be sun.*

This is of course the famous and notably saccharine song lyric from that most saccharine of Broadway musicals, “Annie”, inspired by the comic strip of years gone by.

Like all clichés, there’s a reason why this song has imprinted itself so indelibly in our culture. And it’s not just the catchy tune, which anyone can sing, and too many people do!

There’s actually real wisdom in those words.

The sun will come out tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. Whatever you or I do or don’t do, whatever mood we are in, whatever happens in our lives, whatever they yak about on MSNBC or Fox News tonight, the sunrise will happen tomorrow. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that you or I can do to change the course of solar activity or the orbit of the Earth.

And while over the eons, the sun will live out the course of its own life, for our purposes, in our human perspective, the sun has been and will be doing what it does every day, forever.

The world does not check with us. Nature does not check with us.

For all the machinations of our self-constructed worlds, these activities affect the course of the day not at all. The Earth rotates. We orbit the Sun. We have sunrise, the morning, the afternoon. The sun sets. Evening begets night. And again. And again. And somehow in the passing, we pass by.

And it is that passing of time that is the only reality that we know and will know as human beings. “Beam me up, Scottie”? Oh, no – as the kid famously says in “E.T.”, that great Spielberg film of yesteryear, forget about that. This is reality.

And so, as the Buddhist writer Anne Carolyn Klein said in the Summer 2012 issue of *Buddhadharma* magazine, “the broom has to make contact with the dust.” The passage of time defines our lives. The challenge of living a fulfilled human life is to locate ourselves within the rhythm of life.

The Buddhists have taught me that for life to mean anything, we have to find ourselves within that day to day: within it, not above it, not defining it, and certainly not ruling it. The broom has to make contact with the dust. And not broom-ness and dust-ness. Real brooms. Real dirt. Life is nothing if it is not here. To put it another way, from the pen of Buddhist thinker Jack Kornfeld, “after the ecstasy – the laundry”.

But someone’s going to say, wait a cotton pickin’ minute! Doesn’t Buddhism tell us that the life, this reality, is ephemeral? Doesn’t Buddhism tell us that we shouldn’t suffer for this life, because existence is such a consistently changing phenomenon, it just doesn’t really exist? Do we really have anything? Aren’t I just arguing for an endlessly vapid and alienated listlessness? How can it make any sense to concentrate on what doesn’t exist? So, do we exist?

I find that there is a lot of confusion about how the Buddhist

approach regards this veil of tears through which we live. Two oft mentioned problems are:

The everyday world has no meaning or significance in Buddhism.

Because Buddhism is so concerned with alleviating human suffering, we're just not supposed to feel or care about anything.

I believe both of these conclusions are misguided. The Buddhist approach on the contrary, absolutely cares very much about the everyday world. When the Buddha chose to examine suffering and how to alleviate it, he found that we suffer in this life most not because we care or commit to one another, but because we fixate upon what we should have done and try too hard to anticipate or control what is to come.

This all has to do with what "suffering" means in Buddhism. The word that better serves the Buddhist idea (translated of course from the ancient Pali language) is not suffering, but "attachment". And even if we talk about "suffering", we need to distinguish "suffering" from "pain". There is nothing in Buddhism that suggests that the key to a lived human life (the only path to enlightenment, by the way) is to avoid feeling pain. Of course we feel pain, pleasure, and many other things. We feel all the time. Indeed, there's no way to live a life of love without risking the feeling of pain, and Buddhism is really all about love.

But there is a crucial difference between pain and suffering. We feel pain unavoidably in living a real life; we choose to suffer because we choose to fixate upon something or we find it impossible to accept the way things are.

For Buddhists, life is a flowing river. We suffer when we try to stop the flow of water because we can't accept that what just

happened is done and over, that we can't stop the flow of the river.

Think of it another way. That breath you just took – yes, the one you just took, that you probably did not think about at all, maybe didn't even notice. But you know you just breathed, right? Say that that breath, that one now a minute or two past, was a really good one, one that you just wanted to revel in and marvel at. Of course, if you just fixated on that one breath and forgot to take any more or refused to take any more, because no other breath could possibly be as good, we all know what would happen. Within minutes we would lose consciousness and then not too much later, our lives would end, because the human mechanism, this incredible thing with which we are endowed, needs to take regular breaths to sustain itself. Deprived of breathing, we are deprived of life. And so, we can't dote upon any one breath any more than another. Our very survival is at stake.

In Buddhism this is why attachment brings such suffering. The literal physiological rhythms of life suggest to us that time does not pass on, we pass on. And if we don't, our lives may end or may be only half or partly lived. We should pay attention to what is happening right now, this every moment, because that's how living works. Life is a continual process of being aware of what is happening right now – because that moment that came before? It's already passed.

2.

This whole idea of how to live a fulfilled life is a favorite topic of Buddhist writers these days, and, truth be told, there is a healthy strain of Buddhist writers that can get pretty esoteric and ethereal in their musings. But there is also a good collection of writers who just cut to the chase. They are completely grounded in the here and now.

One of my favorite Buddhist books in this strain of Western Buddhist realism was written by the delightfully iconoclastic Australian Buddhist monk, Ajahn Brham, and is entitled: Who Ordered This Truckload Of Dung?

Brham's book is all about handling life in all its variations and permutations. Here's his premise. We have all experienced this. We're going along and things seem okay and now and again, someone comes along and dumps a truckload of dung right on our proverbial front lawn. They didn't ask permission. They didn't warn us. We didn't deserve it. We wake up in the morning, turn on the coffee, walk out the front door to get the morning paper, and wham-o. There it is. And the neighbors are staring.

Brham of course is using humor to make a more serious point. The living of a human life resists choreography. We just get thrown things that we could not have anticipated from time to time. Some are incidental, some quite serious, some literally life changing. In some ways, it is how we handle the things that we can't expect that defines best the course of our lives.

Brham offers a lot of wisdom in his short book, and I can only recommend it to you. But one thing he says again and again is that first and foremost, we have to locate ourselves where we are. We're never going to start moving that dung pile away unless we pull the shovel out of the garage and start hauling it away, bit by bit, here, today, now, without a lot of fanfare or whining.

The broom has to meet the dust. Sweeping is not a theoretical activity, a what-if. For life to make any sense we must notice what we have right here and right now. There is so much happening right now that makes a difference to us, to our neighbor, to the people we care about. We cannot lose sight of where we are or we're no where. And the sun will keep showing up tomorrow and

every tomorrow to come.

3.

First and foremost, we locate ourselves here and now, not because we have faith; not because we have hope, but when we love. For every Buddhist writer I know, love is at the center of a lived life.

Love is alpha and is omega. It is the greatest gift we can bestow on one another. It is the single most vital way we can say to another and to ourselves, I am here. Right now. Here. No where else. Love is not speculative. It is immediate. Love cannot be touched, but it can be felt. As the songster told us, *“love is never gone. As we travel on, love is what we remember. Can’t forget, won’t regret, what I did for love.”*

Love is not about sentimentality, however, for the Buddhist way. No, sentimentality would be our well meaning, but always and ultimately failed attempt, to capture just what love is. For love is beyond description and beyond doubt and beyond capturing. Nothing makes us feel more real. Nothing keeps us more vitally in the moment. Nothing insists like love, either, that we be right here and right now.

Love can lead us further to our greatest human capability, the ability to feel for another, or empathy. Love as the greatest proof there is that being in the moment is, as James Taylor says, “the finest thing around.”

But it’s not just love that we need. Even, and maybe especially, living in the every moment, the challenges of life are real – physical, moral, emotional, practical, material, expected, and unexpected – life throws a lot at us.

No, we need joy. I would argue that we will not find the energy to move Ajahn Brham's pile of manure unless we have joy in our souls. We are not going to be able to handle the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune with which life can assail us, we are not going to be able to handle much of anything substantial and live a real human life without joy in our hearts.

This topic always brings me to Mozart, perhaps because I so love music. You know, Salieri did not poison Mozart, with all due respects to Peter Schaffer's wonderful creative piece, "Amadeus".

Mozart was one sick dude. Wolfgang Mozart had a weak physical constitution. He also liked to party. Through his short life, he suffered all kinds of ailments. I would bet that on most days he just did not feel all that great and a lot of the time, he felt just plain old lousy.

Given all the health problems he had, and lack of access to real quality health care, it's really not much of a mystery why he died in his 30's. And yet, the corpus of music he has given us is utterly sublime, filled with longing, yes, but also filled with irresistible appeal and indescribable beauty. One of the last pieces he composed, when he must have been feeling terrible, was the short choral piece, "Ave Verum Corpus", which is 3 minutes of the most utter tranquility that human voices together could make.

How could he do it? Even as he felt pained, Mozart could give us, as Scott shared, a wonderful piece like "*Exultate Jubilate*" – "Exult! Be Jubilant! Alleluia!" only because there was a joy in his soul that could not be contained or defeated.

Never stop seeking joy. Nothing could make us more real. Nothing prepares us better to be real.

So, from the search for a meaning in the individual life to the

future of our very existence, the theme is the same: the broom has to meet the dust. We have to face reality and live it day by day. This reality, Elliot. Especially in this day of the ubiquitous cellular device, don't just phone home, ET. Live today.

Let me close with this quote from the March, 2012 issue of *The Unfettered Mind*, a Buddhist newsletter:

Step out of your story.

Step out of your judgments.

Step out of your obsessions with who's right and who's wrong.

Step out of your racing mind.

Take a breath and meet the world you are in.

Let's sing together a great tune and a wonderful hymn, "We Shall Be One."

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Wilmington, DE.
tlw*

From “It’s All Good” by Anne Carolyn Klein, Buddhadharma,
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...we sometimes feel that the thing we call “practice” is more important than the thing we call “daily life” or “our stuff”. But this is just another way of expressing the dualism that is our greatest error. It is precisely this false bifurcation that keeps us from flying whole. The flight of the sage, as Buddhist paths understand this, is not a flight from the days of our lives to the nights of our realization; it is the passionately open encounter that encompasses all.

...Not understanding the inclusive nature of our own energetic sensibility, we fear that acknowledging our jealousies and attachments will somehow obstruct our goal of liberation. But that’s just our deluded dualism talking. The broom must make contact with the dust; the path must make contact with our negativities. Otherwise practice is as meaningless as sweeping what is already immaculate.

...we see that the path, like energetic sensibility, is a wholeness. It is not dualistic emphasis on nirvana to the exclusion of samsara....And our love for what we really are, our most intimate possible knowing, give us the power and confidence to, as Rumi put it, “burst open” – to acknowledge and feel all the elements however miserable, now operating in our lives. Then the path becomes real. And we realize our all-encompassing love for it. Like sunshine on ice, love melts away self-holding, and our patterns along with it. Having melted, the water flows and then evaporates. Our inner radiance remains, ready to share warmth with everyone.

I IMAGINE MYSELF IN TIME

I imagine myself in time looking back on myself –
This self, this morning,
Drinking her coffee on the first day of a new year
And once again she is almost unable to move her pen
through the iron air.
Perplexed by my life as Midas was in his world of sudden
metal,
Surprised that it was not as he'd expected, what he had
asked.
And that other self, who watches me from the distance of
decades,
What will she say? Will she look at me with hatred or with
compassion,
I whose choices made her what she will be?

- Jane Hirshfield