

Cutting Chai with Arun Krishnan

Opinion



A series of (connected) thoughts on ten days of Vipassana meditation

Ten Days a Week

Part 1. Sorrow.

Not so long ago, the city was a mysterious place. There were no sunsets to ride into. And even if there were, who would have spent the time to watch me ride into the glowing flames of the sun to be consumed strand by strand, only to magically reappear on the other side? People have trains to catch. Glances to throw. Puddles to negotiate. Moving forward while pushing at the walls of a bubble can make a man tired, so tired, that he forgets the art of reaction and feels grateful even for a drop of sweat that appears on its own accord.

And then there is Shelburne, Massachusetts that is not very far away from the city. It is easily accessible by switching buses at a town that boasts of a water fountain, a donut store, a post office and a bus stand. The number of violent crimes recorded by the FBI in

Shelburne in 2003 was two. The number of murders and homicides was zero. Shelburne is also home to a Vipassana meditation center, one of 120 in the world.

You can see the sun set on the drive to Shelburne.

Long, long ago when the springs were clean and the elephants were large, a man asked a crowd in the vicinity of a banyan tree that had covered the Buddha: If the “Blessed One” can tell me if the soul and body are identical, or the soul and body are not identical, if there is a life after death, or there is no life after death, if the world is eternal, or the world is not eternal, then I will do as he says. To this the Buddha replied, Did I ever tell you that I would ever tell you that the world is eternal or the world is not eternal? Did I promise to reveal if there is a life after death, or there is no life after death? Did I ever say that I will show you if the soul and body are identical, or the soul and body are not identical? Whatever the dogma obtain, if the world is eternal, or the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, misery, grief and despair. I *can* tell you that all existence is suffering, and that desire is the cause of suffering.

The cafeteria beside the meditation hall in Shelburne has four walls. Two walls intersect at every corner of the room, but only corner has a seating area. Before we took the five vows of abstinence from talking, stealing, sex, telling lies and killing any living creature for a period of ten days, a student advised me to take the seat facing this corner during the meal hours. This way, the silence is complete, he said. You don’t even have to look at anyone.

Even though a poem might be made of a thousand words, but all senseless, one word of a poem is better, which if a man hears, he becomes quiet.¹

By the powers vested in me by the Governor of Massachusetts and the people of the state, I hereby sentence you for the killing of an innocent ant.²

With modern technology, even desire can be quantified. Here's my Amazon.com wishlist. My desire is over a hundred dollars. Do you know the cost of your desires?

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¹

² I must remember to look down at all times while walking.

Part 2. Awareness

One, two, three four, five, six, seven, all good children go to heaven, eight, nine ten, eleven, Eleven shirts, one pant, one jacket, that's a nice song playing on KCRW, I wonder who sang it, there's also one sweater, I should remember to send J...that song, How many shirts were there? One, two, three, four, five, there's the kettle, better shut it off, am not in the mood to argue with my neighbor who complained to the doorman about my hammering a nail last night, damn my Metro card expired yesterday, did I remember to collect my new Metro Card from T...at the office, but before anything I must dry clean these shirts which number One, two, three four...

--A Morning

The thirst of a thoughtless man grows like a creeper – he runs from life to life like a monkey seeking fruit in a forest.³

There are so many stairs in the building. Each one is designed for the express purpose of causing you pain You are out of breath, your collar is soaked, and your shirt forms a protective armor around your chest, even as it whispers vows that speak of never parting ways. Yes, you hate each and every one of your stairs with great vengeance and furious anger⁴. But do you know the exact number of stairs you hate?

³ The Dhammapada advocates restraint not only of monkeys, but also elephants. Hold your mind, it says, as firmly as the rider who wields the hook that restrains the furious elephant.

⁴ He decided to walk the earth.

The most difficult terrain that an explorer can navigate for an extended period of time is the region between the nostrils and the upper lip. It is an experience of the most paradoxical proportions. Even as you are confronted with angry tigers, black swans, exploding supernovae and threatening whirlpools, you have to fight off sleep that overwhelms you, a sleep so powerful that even as your eyes are closed, you see it play out in the cinema screen of your brain as the defensive response of a system confronted with visions of supremely stupendous statures.⁵

If Christopher Columbus had asked the heavens why the might of the Agulhas current bearing down the coast of Madagascar with all its stubbornness had gone missing from his journey, the world would have been a different place.

I can see clearly now, the rain has gone/I can see all obstacles in my way/Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind/Its gonna be a bright, bright, bright, sunny day.⁶

On day three, I look up. I am in the cafeteria. I had spoken to a man a few minutes before the course had started. He is no longer there.

⁵ Lime and limpid green, a second scene/A fight between the blue you once knew/Floating down, the sound resounds/Around the icy waters underground/Jupiter and Saturn Oberon Miranda/And Titania Neptune Titan/ Stars can frighten. In my mind, Syd Barret when experienced actively is more vivid than the pleasure endowed by the wafting of a consciousness seeking visions.

⁶ It (overcast lighting) is one of the easiest lighting conditions to expose for. Overcast lighting also enables you to photograph people, flowers and forests without having to be concerned about your own shadow ruining the composition.

-- Understanding Exposure (How to shoot great photographs), Bryan Peterson

Part 3. Equanimity.

In the November 1, 1995 issue of the American Family Physician, John D. Riley and Suresh Anthony affirm that *leg cramps are involuntary, painful contractions of muscles, usually in the calf but also in other areas of the leg. The diagnosis and management of this common problem can be frustrating for both physicians and patients. In one recent survey,[1] 59 percent of outpatient veterans reported nocturnal leg cramps. Cramps may not present with a set pattern, frequency or duration. They may occur intermittently during one day, or they may persist for several weeks.*⁷

One hour has sixty minutes. Sixty minutes have 3,600 seconds. 3,600 seconds have millions of something something, which for now, can be referred to as nano.

When your senses are so acute that you are able to feel wavelets of air rippling along the surface of your body, you will be more receptive to the argument that your unconscious being is never unconscious. It is always responding and reacting to sensations at a physical level, every minute, every second, every something something. A taxi fender brushing against your knee. A movie about genocide. A bagel without salt. Actions being committed for the benefit of Mr. Kite. You might then see that after all, the unconscious is not that deep inside.⁸

⁷ Leg cramps are also caused by the act of sitting in one position for extended periods of time. They are often accompanied by severe irritation, anger or a potent combination of both.

⁸ The Great Krakatau Volcanic Eruption of 1883 generated giant waves reaching heights of 125 feet above sea-level, killing thousands of people and wiping out numerous coastal villages.

This is a posting that works equally well on the real estate and personal sections of craigslist: Well roofed and pleasant is my little hut/And screened from the winds/Rain at thy will, my God!/My heart is well composed and ardent is my mood/Now rain, God, rain!

In the garden at the meditation center, there is a flower of yellow. It stands supremely indifferent to the rolling of the centipedes, the buzzing of the bees and the roaring of the ants, creatures that in the absence of television have assumed the roles of entertainers putting on performances for our entertainment. The flower stands above the neighboring blades of grass and its other poorer cousins not with an air of superiority, or a fear of being destroyed, but just watching, watching, watching....

Part 4. Impermanence.

Leg cramps usually resolve spontaneously.⁹

Your late fee was based on your account balance as of the payment due date (02/05/07), which was \$281.21. The Annual Percentage Rate on your account has been increased due to one of the following reasons stated in your Card Agreement with us: you failed to make a payment to us when due, you exceeded your credit line or you made a payment to us that was not honored by your bank.¹⁰

I bask in the warm glow of a clear moment. I must be careful not to get sunburnt.

⁹ John D. Riley and Suresh Anthony recognizing the impermanence of leg cramps.

¹⁰ Impermanent

Feelings induced in you by the words: The woods are lonely, dark, and deep/But I have promises to keep/ And miles to go before I sleep¹¹

Impermanence is a difficult concept to wrap your mind around. Our encyclopedias tell us that the sun is impermanent. But we have made plans to go the beach next summer. My eyes closed, I find it difficult to master feelings of anger that keep rising to the surface of my skin. My instructor tells me that if we continue to observe our sensations with equanimity, they will rise to our skins, pass through to our outsides and evaporate, like drops of water upon a summer tin roof. A girl I knew in 2005 comes to my mind. A black cloud surrounds me, and I find the words of my teacher difficult to believe. On my way to the lunchroom, I gaze at a student who seems to be coming apart like a world in disorder. I want to tell him No or even Yes (I am not sure), but the five vows (silence, etc) have imprinted their presence not only on my consciousness, but also on my very body and have manifested themselves physically in my every surrounding.

Part 5. Love.

I resolve to tread the path of love without quoting a cliché. All you need is air conditioning.

By birth is not one an outcast/By birth is not one a Brahman/By deeds is one an outcast/By deeds is one a Brahman.¹²

¹¹ Also impermanent.

¹² On the occasion of India's independence, Dr. Ambedkar, the architect of India's constitution and also a so called "untouchable" presided over the conversion of 380,000 low caste Hindus to Buddhism, thus freeing them from the evil scourges of the caste system. He was following a noble tradition established by none other than Gautama Buddha, who way before Mahatma Gandhi was the first public figure in India to challenge the high-ranking Hindu priests.

Einstein: There are two different conceptions about the nature of the universe. 1) The world as a unity dependent on humanity. 2) The world as a reality independent of the human factor.

Tagore: When our universe is in unity with man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty.

--Rabindranath Tagore in conversation with Einstein, July 14, 1930

I see the same student whose world had nearly come apart a few days ago on the last day of the course. We are in the garden. A sparrow hobbles to a bush, while a new life form wiggles in the bucket of water at the edges of the lawn. We are now allowed to speak. He tells me that he is a jazz pianist. I nod my head in rhythm to the cadence of his voice. He is sufficiently impressed and gives me his CD. I play it on the journey back to New York. It is mellifluous.