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Twilight in America

By Julie Adler

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This 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. Sometimes when I sit and visualize the colors 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. And yet the country I was born into is rocking itself into the hell realm. Blood soaked terrain propels more blood soaking and the cycle continues; there seems to be no choice. Propelled by afflictions.

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. And we do this alone. We may think we have companions but we die alone. Period.

There are more than 5 billion humans on the planet now and few study the dharma. It's a precious jewel more hidden than seen. As the Hummer cruises down the freeway, with wheels that afford a very high panorama, I pass another SUV smashed in on the side, and debris everywhere. Do people see, do they know? They just drive around in their Hummers, with bullet proof shadowy glass protecting bodies that are bound to disintegrate some day. They are bouncing above it all in what some referred to as the 'god' realm here...Los Angeles. Sunny days, wealth, oceans of offerings to yourself. And only yourself. Accumulate, borrow, accumulate more.

I cried at lunch yesterday as a friend told me about a CEO of a well-known movie studio and how much he makes a day; how much he spent 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 Bodhgaya. \$10,000 a day to sit in a soft malleable chair and bark at your employees could feed the

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whole of Bodhgaya for half a year! "It's out of whack", she said. And so do astrologers, psychics, New Age yogis. Yet there's no visible awareness of samsara and how it all goes round and round. It isn't just about living a comfortable happy existence this lifetime, people. It's your own future life at stake. Call it Catholic sin appreciation time. It works for them. You reap what you sow. And so...and so, if you had a clue about the fact that your warmongering would take you straight to the lowest hell in Dante's inferno, and you really knew this – it wasn't just an antiquated Italian classic – you might really think or realize you are thinking?

I came back from India with an upper respiratory infection. When I finally saw my doctor weeks later, she told me I probably had had walking pneumonia; this was before media people coined SARS. I had been in the poorest state of India, Bihar, and the air there is notorious, a disease den. People walk the streets with surgical face masks. You pick your nose and the goop is dark. TB floats through the air

freely. And people die. Lots of them. It's not on the news. It happens every year. It's foggy, it's cold, the air is damp and so get the lungs. I laid in my guest house bed every day wondering if I would get worse or better. I took my Cipro. I didn't even feel strong enough to go the doctor's. My dharma friends said if I died there in Bodhgaya, it would be a real blessing. In the midst of high lamas and especially His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Yes, illness is looked at differently. It's seen as a purification of past deeds, negative karma popping off. All stored in the body. And yet, I come back here and this new mysterious illness is a news breaker. Some Western people have caught the disease and are dying. It's news and it's plummeting airline ticket sales. That's news. But that TB kills thousands a year from all over Asia. Is that news?

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.

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. A few years back I would take photos of these talking men and sew them into the crotch of my worn out underwear. It was part of my art work at the time. They were down there. They still are. But they feel old and gasping. I watched Rumsfeld deliver a speech on TV. He could hardly get a breath. They were short heaves and his chest seemed hard and I thought, "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.

People get so shocked about cancer. Or about this new mysterious disease. Or that old strain of virus coming back. They race against time, their own time. My aunt died a week and a half after I returned back from India. Of pancreatic cancer. Her husband, my uncle, was hating God and that cancer. "I just don't get it", he said, "it's so unfair." My mother cried, "I was dreaming about how much we could do together in the future, and now she's gone. I'm all alone. God is bad." It always surprises me when people get mad at death. According to the Buddhist scriptures, we've died so many times in so many

different types of births, we're bound to this way of existence. Why it's so shocking is because we have forgotten. We're bound to. And we want to. It's not fun to die. It's the most excruciating experience and many teachers remark that the very knowledge of this pain is what makes us want to forget. Your body disintegrates and your brain starts to fry and you are hallucinating. The mind is a continuum...doesn't die but every mental, physical and verbal act is logged in and those past deeds surge forward. The lord of Death meets you. Whammo. There's nothing new or Catholic about what I'm writing. 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 apologize to myself for this disturbing piece. I am disturbed by what I am living in now. But I am also seeing new strains of protest for peace. For a world without killing and violence. Because we all know how unpleasant it is. What we fail to see is how it all works; that if, for example, you kill, you will be killed at some other time, in some other way. If you get furious, your fury will vanquish your happiness. Your pain in the butt boss will keep yelling at you if you keep yelling back. You first, as the anger congeals in the veins, hardens those arteries. Then that tension unleashes itself on everyone around. And so it goes. That's why there are 10 Commandments or Lifetime vows, to keep us in check. Not

some guilt trip but rather a way to stay a course that leads to more pleasant circumstances. Karma is simple. You commit a good deed, you get a pleasant response. You commit a negative deed, something that is unpleasant, you get an unpleasant response. There is no judge. No one upstairs making a decision. It's scientific.

So when Richard Gere was asking the audience to have compassion for the guys who plunged planes into the World Trade Center (he proceeded to get booed), it was because their actions would plunge them into a state more disturbing than what you were witnessing on TV or in person. It's awful. And can't we feel how awful it is? Even just one bomb dropped by a pilot on Baghdad is awful and yes, as we have compassion for innocent civilians at the mercy of flying destruction, we also have to have compassion for the pilot. His pushing of the button, no matter the intention will have a result. How long do we want to keep living with what is awful? How can we just accept what is awful? Oh well it's human nature, I hear.

It is often said that the birth of a human is more rare than a 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.

Human birth is precious and rare. You have 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 4,000 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

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got to be breathing in the first place. Understand how we all breath. How interdependent our breath is. Your SARS breath out is my breath in. It may or may not kill me. It's not about the SARS 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 the guy with the quadruple by pass. The hot-headed Marine. 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.

Hosannah sounds a lot like Osama. Saddam sounds a lot like Bomb. Bush sounds a lot like Woosh. Whoosh Osama Bomb. Hosannah Saddam Bush. Oh say can you see? By the dawns' early light...what so proudly we hail as the twilight's last gleaming?

Born and raised in Los Angeles, attended college at UC Berkeley, Cooper Union (NY) and California Institute of the Arts. Holds degrees in Music, Visual Arts, French, and Economics. Has written articles on Buddhism, yoga, meditation, travel. Currently working on a book about travels in India.

The Mirror Man

By Peter Murphy

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Lady Twilight felt angry. It was one of those days when she was doing her best to be nice to everyone but nobody was being nice to her.

What if people could be friendlier she thought to herself as she wandered through the open air market. It was a warm, sunny day so there was no use blaming the weather. In that case it must mean that people just do not like me, she decided.

The chatter of voices was all around while she sat at a table by the side of the shopping crowd. She sipped a glass of green juice and felt very alone despite all the shoppers rushing about the street. Just then she spotted a young man and the newspaper headline on his paper... Lead And They Will Follow.

Twilight finished her drink and wandered along the street, feeling heavy, tired and still a little angry with this world full of unfriendly people. She turned to the left and walked right past the mirror man, he was there every week selling mirrors of all shapes and sizes. He was singing away to himself

until he spotted Twilight, then the sparkle left his eyes and his face froze into a stern harsh expression.

She glared at him and out of the corner of her eye she caught her reflection in a mirror. She looked so angry and so bad tempered that she even surprised herself. So shocked was she by her look of rage that she burst out laughing.

The mirror man started laughing too and the two of them laughed until it hurt. With a sore belly, Twilight bade farewell to her friend and skipped along through the market with an inner happiness and a smile for everyone she met.

Something weird happened though. At this end of the market everyone wanted to talk to her, and most people seemed pleased to see her. People went out of their way to help her and it was a pleasure dealing with these nice people up this end of the street.

She walked past a news stand and there was that headline again... Lead And They Will Follow. Something clicked – so that is how it works. Smile and people will smile back, give first and then you

will receive. The world is like a mirror and people reflect back to you what you give out.

Although not everyone will be nice back the odds certainly are in your favor if you take the risk and give first. Lead and let others follow your example.

People want to be liked, let them know that you like them and they will feel safer with you and the quality of communication will improve dramatically.

Lady Twilight smiled and the world smiled back.

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