

The Jewel Is in the Lotus

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“...One must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena which arise...” – Henepola Gunaratana on Vipassana Meditation

SWEATING A GALLON JUG OF GREYHOUNDS consumed the night before, Gatlin lay in bed. It was already early afternoon, and the sun was glaring in vertical shafts of heat through the grimy, unshutable blinds that haphazardly hung from the only window in his one room apartment. The dirty sock he used to cover his eyes from daylight's harshness did little to quell today's unspeakably brilliant sun. In spite of his impromptu sleeping-mask's scent, Gatlin directed his attention to his breathing, to the in and out movement of air through his wheezing nostrils, clogged as they were with an unusual mass of nicotine-stained mucous. Snorting hard, he gathered a chunk of phlegm just above his tonsils and spit it into the large Mason jar he kept by his air mattress, for the purpose of urination, in the event he was too hung-over to walk to the toilet. Today was such a day; but more important, today was a new day, a special day. Today, Gatlin would rid himself of that Mason jar, along with every other possession he valued, and to which he was “attached.” After relieving, and then pleasuring himself (as he did in that precise order, every morning), Gatlin hobbled to the shower to cleanse his body for the last time —

as a layman. For today, Gatlin would fully commit, would join the “Sangha,” and begin his journey toward “enlightenment.”



After his body rinse, while gazing at his bloodshot face in the cracked, steam-tinted mirror, Gatlin again turned his attention to his breath, to its flow through his nostrils, in for a count of ten, out for a count of ten. He rubbed a solution of three parts water to one part baking soda under his armpits and between his thighs, and swished a generic mouthwash around his gums and teeth for precisely one minute, or three sets of in and out breaths, toward which Gatlin was trying very hard to focus his attention. (He thought for a moment about the fact that using mouthwash was as effective as flossing for removing plaque. He felt a sensation of gratitude for this fact, followed by a shudder at remembering his aversion to flossing. Then he tried remembering where he had read this fact. Then he remembered he had seen it on television, on a commercial for Listerine. Then he remembered hearing Doctor Sanjay Gupta on CNN talk about this fact, and about how the study that reported this finding was, in fact, sponsored by Listerine. Then he felt a physical sensation of disgust brought on by an intellectual sensation of moral superiority which caused him to audibly grumble at the greedy, shortsighted, corporate ruling elite who manipulated the media into dumbing-down the general public so as to sell more of their products to an already strapped working class for the sinister purpose of controlling more of civilization’s wealth.)

At this point, his most-likely gingivitis gums started to burn, and Gatlin spit the mouthwash into the sink, with some vehemence, and yanked the half-empty bottle from the medicine cabinet, dumping its remaining contents into the commode. It was then that he noticed a whistling noise coming from his nose, caused by some emergent blockage. He suddenly remembered he had dropped his attention from his breathing! He had become a victim of the “Monkey-Mind Phenomenon,” and he urgently refocused his awareness on the flow

of air as it moved in and out through the “delicate gates of life” that were his nostrils, after blowing from them, into a few folded sheets of toilet paper, a slimy, oyster-like mass.

Gatlin ran his fingers through his dampened, matted locks and stared at his bloated reflection, trying to imagine himself bald. Knowing what had to be done, he grasped his Norelco Fancy Trimmer while remaining conscious of his breathing. Following the in and out breath of air around the rims of his nostrils, he flicked on the power switch: silence. Agitated, he momentarily stopped breathing while shifting his gaze up to the fluorescent bulb above the bathroom mirror. Wincing at its brightness, he noticed the empty electrical socket. “Fuck,” he thought. He opened the vanity’s center drawer to search for the razor’s power plug, and rummaged for a few seconds amongst the lotions, matchbooks, Tylenol packets, Q-tips, and dull nail clippers before seizing the thin wire with its phallic insertion jack that connected at the other end to the black-box power source. Jamming the jack into the underside of the razor, he plugged the power source into the socket over his head and flicked the switch: nothing. “Shit,” he mumbled, and, tossing the Norelco onto the counter, he stomped from the bathroom to find his Tracfone.



“Chrissie,” he said with gravity and precise diction over the crackling of a weak signal, “I need you to come over right away and bring your father’s beard trimmer.”

“What for?”

“So you can help me shave my head.”

“Are you serious?” she said.

“Dead serious. If I am to practice the Dharma with any truth, it is absolutely vital that I adopt the external as well as the internal. My appearance is a crucial aspect of my commitment to the Sangha and to The Way.

“You’re a retard.”

“Do not argue. One day you will understand. As a Bodhisattva, I promise to remain in the world to help all sentient beings escape the Wheel of Birth and Death. I will aid you, too, in your quest for Nirvana,” he said, wondering what teen spirit did, in fact, smell like. He then returned his focus to his nostrils, and so to his breath. “And please stop by the Dollar Tree and pick up some candles and incense for my ceremony, for which you’ve already promised to join me.”

“Whatever,” she said.

“I do not expect you to fully understand. You have not yet chipped away at the wall of illusion that hides you from the truth. Ignorance is a primary hindrance. Remember this prayer: ‘May all beings everywhere, with whom we are inseparably interconnected, be fulfilled, awakened and free. May there be peace in this world and throughout the entire universe, and may we all together complete the spiritual journey.’ Remember this prayer like a mantra. And please stop by the 7-11 and get me a pack of Marlboro Lights, in a box.”



Later that evening, with a bumpy, bald head ripely shaved, Gatlin tripped walking into the Kings Hospital Thrift Store, his nose landing squarely between the buffed and shiny breasts of an otherwise filthy, headless mannequin, which broke his fall. Before picking himself up, Gatlin lay for a moment on top of the naked and plastic humanoid, wishing to refocus on his breathing, and so followed with his attention the in and out movement of air around the rims of his nostrils, from which the new pain in his just banged, left elbow was now distracting him. As he breathed in and out, his awareness shifted from the sensation of air around his nose to the musty stench of the store, emanating from the rows and rows of dusty, moth-riddled clothing, surrounding him on all sides like an army of ghosts. As he lay breathing, he became faintly aware of another stench: that of a cross between the malt vinegar he enjoyed sprinkling on his fried whiting at Captain’s Fish and Chips, and the grated parmesan cheese from his refrigerator, which just yesterday he had used to hide the taste of a can

of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee Ravioli. Finding the combined smells particularly out of context and revolting, Gatlin opened his eyes to find himself staring at a pair of bulbous and calloused feet housed in a pair of tiny, pink flip-flops. It was from between the ten, yellowed toes hanging over the front edge of the rubber sandals that the bottom-of-the-hamper smell originated.

“Are you ok?” said a voice from above. “Let me help you up,” and suddenly a hairy hand was thrust in Gatlin’s face.

“Fine, thanks,” he said, ignoring the hand.

Gatlin pushed himself up on all fours and hovered for an instant above the decapitated, synthetic lady with whom he had had just shared a moment, thinking briefly of Chrissie and wondering just how much of a challenge his chosen life of celibacy would be. Using a coat rack covered in what seemed to be furs made of patchwork rodent, Gatlin hoisted himself to his feet. Standing before him was an unshaven, middle aged man wearing Jordache jean cut-offs, a polyester shirt with a paisley print, an ill-fitting sequined dinner jacket, and clown-sized sunglasses. A lime-green feather boa swirled dramatically about his neck. Stunned by the sight of his would-be rescuer, Gatlin quickly bent down to upright the mannequin. Lifting her by the shoulders, he was arrested by the voice of the stranger.

“May I cut in,” the stranger chuckled, and — grabbing the mannequin by the waist — he began twirling it around and around, culminating in a final dip, before setting her vertically on her stand. Now slightly broken from the scuffle with Gatlin, she bent crookedly, as if afflicted with severe scoliosis.

“So, what brings you by my little palace?” the stranger inquired, and then whispered: “You’re not planning to sue me for the fall, are you?”

“You work here?” asked Gatlin.

“More than that dear. I own the place; and it works me!”

“Is that get-up the employee uniform?”

“Oh, no, honey. My friends and I are going to the Elton John concert tomorrow night, and we’re picking out some costumes.” The

stranger turned and waved to three very well dressed young men, one of whom had donned a tiara. “But what about you, sweetie? What kind of a disguise are you looking for to go with that haircut — if you can call it that?”

Gatlin looked at the stranger and said, “I’m actually looking for a Bhikkhu’s tunic.”

“A what, honey?”

“A monks robe. Something a Tibetan monk would wear. I’m converting to Buddhism tonight.”

“I see,” said the stranger. “And you want to make it official. I have just the thing!”



Satisfied that the orange bathrobe would meet his purposes for now, Gatlin left Kings Daughters, making a mental note to ask his mother to sew a Buddha patch over the Holiday Inn Bangkok logo, a patch he felt sure he could purchase on eBay.