

**India has given us an overabundance of gifts, peerless mathematicians, those numerals we call Arabic but which found their origin in India, with them the numeral zero, so crucial in our calculations and so resonant of the Buddhist conception of emptiness. Yes, Buddhism, that child of the Indian subcontinent has a fascination with numbers, the eightfold path to enlightenment, the five skandhas that make up our very being, and, of course, the four noble truths.**

**Perhaps you know them, life is suffering, the suffering has a cause, the cause can be cured, the**

cure is, as it happens, that eightfold path. But I'd like to talk about suffering, the first of the four noble truths. We humans live in a world of suffering, a world easy to ignore as we go about our daily lives, believing ourselves personally untouched by it. The poet W.H. Auden stood before a painting in Brussels in the 1930's and had a few words to say about our casual disregard in his:

Musee des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position; how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window  
or just walking dully along;

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately  
waiting

For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen,  
skating

On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot

That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its  
course

Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the  
torturer's horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus for instance: how everything  
turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman  
may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun  
shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the  
green

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must  
have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Buddhism as the religion of suffering is a trope so popular that many of us, even those of us who are long time practitioners, buy into it without looking into the subtler aspects of that suffering. I recall the Soto Zen priest Jisho Warner talking about moving west to Sebastapol, California and attending a picnic with neighbors when a woman came up to her and berated her for claiming, as a Buddhist priest, that life was nothing but suffering. "Not me", the woman proclaimed loudly and vociferously, "I'm not suffering". Well, of course not, but just how content are you? one

might ask. The world is our witness that people do experience cruel and appalling suffering, no matter how sheltered we ourselves might be. Wars rage on, famine and disease cover the land. Floods and fires devastate our world. The lives of friends, relatives and, sometimes, we ourselves turn on a dime. The homeless wander our streets seeking food and shelter and even here in central Pennsylvania, children go to bed hungry each night. But dukkha, the word the Buddha used is all too quickly simply translated as suffering rather than, perhaps more accurately and broadly as dissatisfaction. As a friend pointed out to me the other day, dukkha in Sanskrit comes from the

technical term describing the misalignment of an cart's axle with the hole through which it turns, a kind of squeaky wheel, certainly a wheel that, if it could experience, then it would experience its condition less as a pain and more as a world out of kilter. We all know that dissatisfaction, that sense of our world being not quite right, even, no, especially, that woman Jisho Warner encountered, deny it though she might. Thoreau reminds us that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation". I experience it every time Apple comes out with a slightly more advanced iPhone, even if I have yet to explore all the wonders my outdated phone has to give. Yes, perhaps it is overkill to talk of a

starving, homeless child as dissatisfied, but certainly, they wish life were otherwise.

We all live with that quiet thrum of an axle out of true, the sense that our lives, if not wildly off the rails, are, none the less traveling down a road badly in need of resurfacing, perhaps not devastating, but not that smooth ride we'd prefer. I live in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania not because I was drawn here, no, scrapple and apple butter have their rustic charms, but not charm enough to lure me to Appalachia. We moved here because my wife, Karen, was born and raised near here. As her mother declined into increasing frailty, we realized



that caring for her from across the continent would not do, and so we sold our home in Oakland and moved back East, as close as we could without encroaching upon either my mother-in-law or Karen's sisters. Karen had grown up in the same house her father had been raised in and this sense of rootedness, natural to her, is, nonetheless, a foreign concept for me. My own family had moved throughout my childhood, and the notion of a home, a hometown, a place to return to was and is alien. The idea of a home, of roots, seems strange and roots in a rural, deeply conservative town even more so. But, I did promise her, in sickness and in health, and so as ".... Ruth said, Intreat me not to

leave thee, or to return from following after thee:  
for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou  
lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my  
people, and thy God my God:" I don't recall the  
Book of Ruth talking about Ruth being  
dissatisfied, but I can well imagine her being so, at  
least at times.

I know that, deep down, my wife had always  
harbored a nostalgia for her family home here in  
the Susquahanna valley, a nostalgia, a pain, that  
cuts both ways, both a desire to be here and the  
pain of actually returning to that which had, as did  
she, moved on.

The Trojan War has left us with two monuments in world literature, the Illiad and the Odyssey, both sole surviving examples of what were probably many other epics spun out of that far off war. The Odyssey in particular is the sole surviving example of the nostoi, the epics relating the homeward journeys, the nostoi of the veterans of that War. Nostoi, the returns, the plural of nostos the return from which we get our nostalgia. Nostos, paired with pain, algia, a root we find in neuralgia and myalgia , the pain of returning, or, more often, the pain of the desire to return - homesickness and, equally, being sick of home.

And I, even as I deny any sense of home, I still  
resonate, still feel A. E. Housman's

That is the land of lost content, ,  
I see it lying plain,  
the happy highways where I went  
and cannot come again.

This sense of nostalgia, this sense of the loss of  
something we think we possessed even if we never  
had, this dukkha becomes a common trope in my  
practice of Zen Buddhism. Students often present  
themselves to teachers only to be asked, "Where  
have you come from?" "Where were you last?"

**“Where did you spend the summer training period?”, a typical opening gambit, so often missed by that student. Here, in case 15 of that classic collection of koans, the Gateless Gate, we hear the teacher Yunmen ask Dongshan, later a master in his own right,**

**“Where were you most recently?”**

**Dongshan said, “At Chadu.”**

**Yunmen said, “Where were you during the summer?”**

**Dongshan said, “At Baozi Monastery in Hunan.”**

**Yunmen said, “When did you leave there?”**

Dongshan said, "August 25<sup>th</sup>."

Yunmen said, "I spare you sixty blows."

Next day, Dongshan came again and said,

"Yesterday you said you spared me sixty blows. I don't know where I was at fault."

Yunmen said, "You rice bag! Do you go about in such a way, now west of the river, now south of the lake?"

With this, Dongshan had a great awakening.

And these answers, Chadu, Baozi Monastery,

Oakland, Northumberland, Lewisburg....these are good, straightforward answers, but not the whole

of the matter, not the deepest part of our own being, not that place we have never left, but may have forgotten. Just where is your true home? Where can you return without feeling sick of home? And what is that home? A place? an experience? a family? The great Soto Zen teacher, Kodo Sawaki, never settled down as an abbot in his own temple in Japan. He is known to us to this day as Homeless Kodo, who is most often quoted for his advice to us that “What’s zazen good for? Absolutely nothing! This “good for nothing” has got to sink into your flesh and bones until you’re truly practicing what’s good for nothing. Until then, your zazen really is good for nothing.”

**We can all feel that heartache, we all do feel that  
heartache, that nostalgia. We can all, with Leonard  
Cohen, return to that home we have never left:**

**Going home without my sorrow  
Going home sometime tomorrow  
Going home to where it's better  
Than before**

**Going home without my burden  
Going home behind the curtain  
Going home without this costume  
That I wore**



**Going home, going to that true home we have never left. Hold your hand out and grasp at the air. turn your hand over, unclinch your fist and gaze at all that you have gained, a whole lot of emptiness, or, perhaps another perspective, the whole of the universe. Your true home.**

