

## Truths, Travel, and Trash Cows

The nature of existence is suffering—at least that’s what Buddhism’s First Noble Truth proclaims. The Pali word *dukkha* is commonly translated as “suffering,” but it means something more like “unsatisfactoriness,” since it is the result of our proximity to unpleasant things and our distance from pleasant things. Travel is certainly full of *dukkha*: we leave the familiarity and comforts of home behind for the uncertainty of a new place, often worrying about what might go wrong while we’re gone or what might befall us while we’re there.

Thus it was that, after many anxious months of preparation, packing, vaccinations, medications, and frustrations, I travelled to Bodh Gaya, India—the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment 2500 years ago and now the most important Buddhist pilgrimage site in the world—to study Buddhism and practice meditation in a monastery. I don’t know exactly what comes to mind when you think of meditation, monasteries, and pilgrimage sites, but I’m fairly certain Bodh Gaya is the opposite. Westerners tend to imagine Buddhism as tranquil, meditative, and in harmony with nature, but Bodh Gaya boils with chaotic energy. Its assault on the senses often begins with noise. Roosters crowing, motors revving, men shouting, brooms swishing across floors and courtyards, trying in vain to keep the dust at bay. But the main ingredient in the city’s auditory *mélange* (and one of the greatest causes of my own *dukkha*) is honking.

To honk in America is to signal another’s error: “The light is green, dummy!” “You cut me off, jerk!” “Don’t hit me, stupid!” To honk in Bodh Gaya is an existential proclamation: I honk, therefore I am. Each blast of a horn says, “I am driving here. You are in my way. If you do not move there will be hell to pay.” If you were to stop honking, you might simply vanish from the road. Traffic is a hodgepodge of tuk-tuks, cars, buses, bikes, and pedestrians. The motorcycle,

however, is the archetypal vehicle. It is usually maneuvered by a young Indian man, often with another man straddling the seat behind him, or else a woman regally sitting sidesaddle as if in some more orderly, parallel universe she sat atop a noble steed in greener pastures. Nobody ever wears a helmet—perhaps they don't even exist. It doesn't help that there are no traffic lines or signs, no stoplights or crosswalks. There is no "correct" side of the road here—drivers compete in endless games of chicken for the power to make their own lanes. I once sat in a dirty plastic chair on the upper floor of our monastery's meditation hall, overlooking one of Bodh Gaya's main roads, to watch the traffic. After an hour, I was mostly amazed I hadn't witnessed any major accidents or fatalities, and simply concluded that if there was any order to the madness, it was beyond human knowing.

Aside from the motorbike, Bodh Gaya's streets are dominated by the beloved trash cow. Sacred to Hindus, cows lumber alongside the roads, utterly unperturbed by the cacophony. Their dung decorates the dusty avenues like fragrant landmines, challenging pedestrians to manage the traffic as well as—squelch!—keep their eyes peeled for poo. The cows fuel this excrement by combing through roadside buffets of garbage, horribly unsanitary piles of rotting food, plastic chip bags and water bottles, held together by dust and dangerously close to open sewers. The trash cow is the only thing in the world that can stop the chaos of traffic, drawing irate honks as it moseys across the road or juts its rump out into the paths of oncoming vehicles.

During morning meditation at 5:30 (yes, in the *morning*), the city would wake up with us. The sky would lighten and the honking would commence, punctuated by the harsh crows of roosters in the monastery courtyard, as we sat on our cushions and tried to empty our minds. On those September mornings early in the program, sweat dripped into my eyebrows as I tried to breathe deeply without coughing on the Bodh Gaya air, choked as it was with dust, smoke, and

diesel exhaust. The loud and stinky craziness of Bodh Gaya combined with the ongoing threat of stomach bugs and heat stroke made me ache for my home and loved ones, for the crisp autumn air of Minnesota, and for some damn peace and quiet.

Bodh Gaya is full of *dukkha* beyond the unsatisfactoriness of these experiences and into the heart-rending world of others' deep suffering. As American students, we were relentlessly overcharged by people who knew we had more rupees hidden in our rooms at the monastery than they might make in a lifetime. Beggars—often children in threadbare clothing, sometimes with missing or disfigured limbs—hounded us for money or food. If we gave them anything, more would swarm, overwhelming us with the magnitude of poverty's destruction. We could do a lot of good by giving all we had away, but that would still be almost nothing.

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The Second Noble Truth states that the cause of *dukkha*, of unsatisfactoriness, is a thirst or craving, an attachment to desire. Of course, all of us *want*, but we also cling to and identify with that which we want, not remembering that—whether we say it's good or bad—it will pass. I travelled to India expecting many things: I expected (with some intellectual haughtiness) to learn, to make new friends, to be challenged, to be changed. Travel always comes with the baggage of expectations and desires, but clinging to these standards of success sets us up for dissatisfaction when the world doesn't behave the way we think it will or want it to.

As October brought slightly cooler weather and a deepening sense of regularity, I found it far easier to meditate. I stopped thinking so much about how well meditation was going or how successfully I was progressing. Of course, there were days that felt terribly distracting and days of shocking calm, but I tried to remember that soon it would be the next day, and then the next

week, and soon enough I would be saying goodbye to Bodh Gaya and everything it had come to mean. Oddly enough, this grounded me. I'd spent so much time thinking about the *dukkha* of my life, focusing on identifying and judging what was wrong with me, with other people, with the world, and wishing that it were otherwise, blind to the present moment, beautiful because it was frail. I slowly began to realize the bittersweet joy of laughter, melancholy, and pain, savored like the last bite of ice cream on a sweltering day.

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Despite its frenzy, it is not true that Bodh Gaya never sleeps—thankfully it does—but it remains untamable: it is never boring and cannot be circumscribed. It is often a shockingly blunt teacher of the First Noble Truth of *dukkha*. One day, during my first weeks in Bodh Gaya, I had ventured out of the refuge of the monastery with a couple of friends to run some errands:

“Oh, someone has died,” said Ramesh—a weaselly man who had been following me around since my first day in town—gesturing to the side of the road as we walked, where a woman’s body lay on the floor of a tuk-tuk, rigid with death.

“You are my great friend,” Ramesh stated plainly, as if we had known each other all our lives (and hadn’t just seen a corpse). I looked away and shuddered.

Weeks later, I had gone with a friend to pick up clothes from one of the many skilled tailors in town. Sitting on a stool outside the shop, a funeral procession passed me as I waited. The recently deceased lay high on a fabric stretcher held aloft by pallbearers, except there was no coffin. The corpse lay surrounded by vibrant flowers, subject to the elements and to the movements of those who carried him. Watching the dead man jostle and wiggle ridiculously, I

couldn't help but laugh. Death was never final in this part of the world. I watched the procession disappear down the street and cross a bridge, the body still rocking ludicrously.

The Third Noble Truth teaches that there is a cessation of suffering in the relinquishing of attachments to desires. This is how I was able to laugh at death when before I had balked. I do not remember how or when exactly it happened, but somehow, I had come to accept death. It was not on a deep and ultimate level, certainly, but to some small extent, I had realized the transiency of life—how breath rises and falls in the body, how one footstep rises and falls before the next can happen, and how the flame of life is extinguished in all things. Before, I would've considered this understanding horribly depressing or upsetting. What it was, mostly, was liberating.

And suddenly, it was December, time for sleepless nights spent reminiscing under starless skies, for last suppers, cups of tea, and for hugs that could never quite last long enough. It was time to say goodbye, yes, but it was also time to greet newness, for everything dies but is also reborn, and the great wheel keeps turning. And that is something which makes the noble truths deeply hopeful: happiness may be ephemeral, but so is sadness, pain, and suffering. Where death lurks, so too does life wait for a new beginning.

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There is a Fourth Noble Truth, but it is not for me to describe. It is the path to the cessation of suffering, a path which you must find and follow for yourself and for others. But if the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism can be the Four Noble Truths of Travel, then travel freely, without the pressure of daunting expectations. Travel openly and let the experiences of your life sink into the marrow of your bones without ever grasping them too tightly. Travel without taking anything too seriously and try to blow off some *dukkha*. Travel with the wistful sweetness of

knowing that endings are also beginnings, and that all good (and bad) trips come to an end. I know this is a lot to keep track of, but try it—you just might find it liberating.