

Spiritual Overhaul for a Western Mind by Paul J. Vielle

When our car's engine loses power, we know its time for an overhaul. The mechanic replaces worn-out parts, readjusts the settings and power is restored.

Minds are like engines too. So long as they operate within the knowledge limits set by the owner's culture, they can operate smoothly, even for lifetimes. Daily, they accumulate knowledge, make decisions and render judgments about everything in the world. In time, our minds figure out how the world works. We become attached to notions about what is good and evil; what is wholesome and what is abhorrent. These ideas are firmly entrenched in our psyche and define who we are and enable us to make sense of the world. But the mind-engine can develop serious malfunctions when placed in an unfamiliar environment. Such was the case for me last month, when Karen and I traveled in India. My Western mind was not prepared for the reality that is India. It turned out that nothing short of a spiritual overhaul could restore balance and calm to my agitated mind.

I knew India was a third world country. In a vague bookish way, I understood that to mean: overpopulation, poverty and pollution. But nothing in my experience prepared me for what awaited us at the train station in Bodhgaya, our first major stop on the trip. We had taken the overnight train from Delhi and arrived in Bodhgaya (the place where the Buddha received his Enlightenment) a little before 5:00 in the morning. It was just beginning to get light. We stepped off the train, gathered our bags and started walking toward the station entrance. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I became aware of movement on the ground; of grey shapes stirring. They were people who had been sleeping on the ground, and now rousing themselves. Suddenly, it seemed everyone at once jumped to their feet and moved toward us. "Carry your bag sir?", "Need a guide, sir?" "Madam, take your bag?" "Sir,...sir..." Beggars with wretched faces closed in, their grimy hands outstretched. "Please, sir! Something for the poor?" The acrid odor of sweat and the sewer rolled over us. We pressed our way through the crowd, (-refusing every offer of assistance). Moments later we were jostled on all sides as other travelers streamed through the front door of the station. The noise was deafening; a cacophony of shouting porters, blaring loudspeakers, crying babies, and shrill whistles. Outside the station door, the way opened onto a large plaza. Scores of people were still on the ground; -some still sleeping and some preparing tea on small fires. Cars and busses roared up the station, weaving in and out among the people, horns ablaring. Cows roamed freely rooting in the trash that littered the plaza; their excrement seen everywhere. Moments later we were in a mini-van lurching our way through a narrow, congested, pot hole-covered street to our hotel. I was in sensory shock, nothing short of total emotional overload. My mind reeled with initial reactions of denial, disbelief and revulsion. "This is insane! It's awful! How can they live in such misery? Have they no pride?" The only way my Western mind-engine could cope with what I saw, was to conclude: "I am not like these people. I have nothing in common with them."

Several depressing days followed. At times, I felt close to tears for no apparent reason. Clear thinking eluded me. I felt dopey, unsteady on my feet and vulnerable to physical injury. I struggled to understand what was happening. Over and over, the question came up: “Why all this mental agitation? Why is this so hard for me?” On the fourth day, we were in a bookstore. I happened upon a copy of the Dhammapada; a collection of the Buddha’s teachings. I opened it to the chapter entitled “Twin Verses” and read the familiar:

Our life is shaped by our mind;
We become what we think.
Suffering follows an evil thought,
As the wheels of a cart follow the ox
That draws it.

Our life is shaped by our mind;
We become what we think.
Joy follows a pure thought
Like a shadow that never leaves.

Reflecting on this insight, it came to me that the cause of my depression was in my head. Not out there. The old mind-engine was sputtering because my long cherished Western attitudes didn’t apply here. My spiritual overhaul had begun. The first faulty part to be stripped out was my perception that life here was intolerable. True enough, potable drinking water and toilet paper were not available everywhere, as I expected they should. So what? Life goes on. People adapt. You carry bottled water. You adopt new toileting behaviors. True, life in the street was chaotic and at times frightening. But looking closer, I saw that people were not frantic, no one was yelling; there were no shaking of angry fists. Looking at myself, I still had all my limbs and had not been physically threatened in any way. I realized my first task was to stop characterizing everything as bad or undesirable. The overhaul continued. The second component to get tossed was my foolish delusion that I, me, myself,was somehow different from (and superior to) the people around me. Now, it is self-evident that everyone: Americans, Indians, Buddhists, Christians, young or old - all people everywhere grasp at things they believe will make them happy, and avoid situations they believe will bring unhappiness. The Buddha taught that all things and events in the universe are impermanent and interrelated. We suffer when we don’t get what we want, when things “out there” don’t live up to our expectations. He went on to show that what we think of as reality (the world of permanent, separate things out there) is in fact in a constant state of flux. Since phenomena are always in flux they can possess no fixed, permanent attributes of their own. They just are. Neither good nor bad. Neither better nor worse. We can see reality by just looking; before any thought, or judgment, or evaluation is brought to it.

These insights reminded me everyone acts from similar motives. My arrogant belief that I was “better than” the people around me, had no relevance

to Truth. Such views arose purely from my arbitrary judgment that having a nice home, a clean toilet, new clothes, fresh bedding, sparkling water, and wholesome food all conferred superiority. I understood that having or not having these things had nothing to do with goodness or entitlement. They simply represented the unfolding of the universe in this particular moment; all could change in the very next. Nothing is permanent. Things got better for me after that. My Western mind-engine began to perk up. I stopped trying to compare everything to conditions at home. Thereafter, I just tried to be in the moment, ...moment by moment, simply watching whatever there was to see. And I began to see all kinds of wonderful things, just as they unfolded. A woman climbing out of the Ganges River, shouted happily, "Om nama Shviya!" (Praise to Lord Shiva!) to no one in particular. A beggar smiled when the 5 Rupee coin dropped into his cup. An old man gently pushed a cow away from his fruit stall. A barefoot child darted past me wearing a garland of marigolds. Everything was just as it should be. There was nothing to fear. There was nothing to need. Letting go of preconceived ideas is a wonderfully liberating experience. Like the Buddha said, you are what you think. Like cars, all minds benefit from spiritual overhauls now and then. *****