

Some Thoughts about India

India is a great place to learn about the value of patience. People who are in a rush to get from point A to point B quickly will find this country frustrating since few things in India seem to move with clockwork efficiency. If you observe how a cow walks, you will understand how events generally move in India: at a leisurely pace in which pauses at any moment are possible. No rush. It has taken many lifetimes to get this far. What is time anyway?

What is ultimately "clean?" India is a good place to reflect on that. Even though many of the streets in India are dirty and cow dung seems ubiquitous, many are serious about spiritual cleanliness and washing the filth of egotism away. By contrast, though the streets and houses in many places in the other parts of the world seem clean, if you look into peoples' hearts then much contamination is apparent. Too few people seem serious about inner cleansing as a lifetime process. For sure, it is good to maintain a clean external environment, but we should also remember ultimately there is no cleanliness in this world. Sickness, decay, and death can be covered up for periods - but sooner or later they will manifest since they are inevitable features of existence.

Japan and India represent opposite spectrums of the human experience in some ways. In Japan, by and large things tend to seem clean, orderly, middle-class, and with a focus on pragmatic relativism. In India, by contrast, few things are outwardly clean or orderly and the contrast between the rich and poor is startling. Moreover, there is a great love of the abstract and theoretical and curious disregard for what most people in Japan would call "common sense." The whole notion of "common sense," however, gets shaken up when we closely examine different cultures. What seems like "common sense" in one culture could be regarded as odd or even wrong in another culture.

The past is still very much alive in India. Time is woven deeply into the landscape in ways many so-called "modern" people may not comprehend. Legends dating back thousands of years are still considered current. And many parts of India actually don't seem to belong to this century. People live more or less the same way now as they did millennia ago. Like all things, there are advantages and disadvantages to this arrangement. Lifespans are often short. Disease is rampant. Poverty is widespread. Yet there may be redeeming features. The reality of suffering is not artificially disguised or whitewashed. And if you look closely, the need for spiritual transcendence becomes crystal clear. Also, our so-called "modern" petroleum-based civilization is sure to collapse soon since it is ultimately unsustainable. However, the ancient ways in some parts of this planet may outlast modern materialistic cultures.

How many Indians does it take to build a few kilometers of road? Several hundred it seems: perhaps a hundred to break boulders into gravel, a few dozen to boil tar, and dozens more to fetch wood for the tar boiler. Another hundred would be needed to toil with tiny shovels. Dozens more are needed to stand with construction flags around vehicles passing by. We should also mention the many people needed for paperwork, planning, and recruiting. And at any moment, most laborers will simply rest by the roadside. What is the point of hard work if the boss isn't looking? Why not take it easy and stretch a two-day task into a ten-day job? In India huge numbers of individuals are employed over long periods of time to accomplish relatively simple tasks. In the many other parts of the world, the same tasks could be

accomplished by few people operating large machines quickly. However, perhaps road construction is not the actual goal of the Indian system: it is merely one way to keep many people employed. In India, it seems like roads are never built: they are perpetually under construction. In fact, the idea of a completely finished road is like nirvana: a noble aspiration seldom achieved in one life. As soon as one section of a road seems finished, another needs repair. And so the whole world stays busy day after day. Yet curiously enough, people who really need to reach their destinations find ways to get there whether or not roads exist. Nothing can keep a sincere aspirant from his or her goal.

Some places in India where saints have achieved liberation still resonate with a powerful energy. It is hard not to notice a reverberation of sanctity in such places. To simply breathe there is a blessing. And generally, the less tourists the better. Too many camera clicks lead to less focus on real experience. One problem is that such places often tend to become market stalls where all sorts of goods are hawked. Hawkers should keep their business away from sacred places . . . or perhaps it is we who need to learn to see all places as sacred. Anyway, sanctity should not be perverted into something that is for sale. Real spirituality can never become a market commodity.

In India, some gurus seem to be like business agents. I do not like to think of teachers in this way, yet market forces should be understood clearly. In India spiritualism and materialism often embrace in surprising ways. Like two poles of the same magnet, these polar ways of thinking create amazing dialectics: one can observe the interaction of these perspectives through many facets of Indian life. Samadhi and samsara are twins in many ways.

One of the most valuable lessons India teaches is that death could come any day. In many OECD countries, many people are too confident that they will live at least until age 65. In India it is harder to have this confidence. There are so many contagious diseases and often the food and water is tainted. Even if you feel healthy now, within 48-72 hrs. you might leave the body. Once you acknowledge that any day might be your last, your whole perspective on life becomes different. India is a place where many are asking, "How should a human life actually be measured? By the things we accomplish? By those we have loved? By what we have read or written?" All of these seem insignificant when you experience the nature of suffering up close. India and Africa are places where raw truths often confront people directly. India is like a giant grinding wheel: all sense of individuality turns to dust in a nation with over a billion people and several thousands of years of tradition. Your entire world is a mere speck of dust on Eternity's Feet. The ego might imagine it has the power of Indra, but alas - it is nothing but dust.

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