



The Journalist in the Lotus:

SEEKING ENLIGHTENMENT ON THE BEAT

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everal years ago, I had the misfortune to be the associate producer on a radio project that enabled me to travel to interesting places looking for environmental degradation. That's not the trouble. Trouble took the form of the producer, a longtime radio and print journalist who was also a Tibetan Buddhist and who had, in a breach of journalism, served for a time as the p.r. person for the 14th Dalai Lama, head of the Gelugpa sect, and temporal leader of the Tibetan nation.

The producer kept an altar in her hotel room. Together we journeyed to a monastery near Kathmandu, Nepal, and participated in a *puja* she had arranged for; she gave me a copy of the Dalai Lama's autobiography. Still, an extremely judgmental person, she expressed great anger and lack of compassion (no-no's of Buddhist practice) and showed no mercy for the ill or those who questioned her. This was a lesson for me in that what one espouses may conflict with what one does; in that what one does in the service of journalism may conflict with the actions and ethics of Buddhism; in that it may be impossible for one person to practice both.

I like to look in the drawers of bedside night tables. This in m/hotels. Phone books—so much information on the new place. And, always, a book, donated always, for the spirit of the traveler on the way to their own usually commercial Bethlehem.

I open at random: usually the New Testament. Check out the verse for its message to me, for the moment. It's interesting, but not such a big deal.

Here's where I turn to the camera, look up, and say, "Except for once."

The Miyako Hotel, San Francisco, a meeting of the National Federation of Community Broadcasters. In the night table, no Gideon, but Buddha: a medium blue cloth-covered book, *The Teaching of Buddha*.

I open the book somewhere near the middle, and read:

Once upon a time a man looked into the reverse side of a mirror and, not seeing his face and head, he became insane. How unnecessary it is for a man to become insane merely because he carelessly looks into the reverse side of a mirror!

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For the past two years I've been thinking about what this could mean. Sometimes I even think I've got it; other times, it's better to go back to thinking about "the reverse side of a mirror," about the nature of seeing and not seeing, wondering about the depiction—or translation—of the event as "unnecessary," and so on. Very often, I wonder about what this has to do with my profession, journalism, and the relationship of journalist and subject, with the nature of story, and with the way journalists perceive "objectivity" or "journalistic distance," and with journalists being considered celebrities, and vice versa. (And recently, there's the presence of journalists as liars, as writers of fiction rather than reporters of external truth in a time when, increasingly, commerce drives the story. Seeking more listeners/viewers/readers/dollars, the journalist may feel pushed into embellishing the story, rather than telling the plain truth.)

During this time, I've read more about Buddhism, (Tibetan, in particular); attended teachings in Dharamsala, India (seat of the Tibetan Government in Exile and residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama), in Kentucky (where I attended—and reported on—a week-long international gathering of Buddhist and Christian monastics at the Abbey of Gethsemani), and in New York (including some teachings lasting several days); taken a

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course in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism at Columbia University; and tried to reconcile the goal of journalists to uncover information, whatever the means, with Tibetan Buddhism's objective to be compassionate and to work to eliminate suffering for all sentient beings. Not that these goals are at cross-purposes necessarily, but the means of achieving them are quite different: from nimble, double-triple think, always judging, to clear mind, free of judgments.

There are certain bases of Buddhism and its many branches. This not being a treatise on the Word, I'll paraphrase. Considerably. Essentially, most reduce, or expand, from the Four Noble Truths: everything is suffering, suffering has a cause; this suffering has an end; and there is a path to take to end this suffering.

Additionally, there are certain agreements one makes on the path toward extinguishing suffering (with the caveat that if you can fix it, do so, and if it's unfixable, move on): to show compassion toward all sentient beings, even enemies; to avoid anger; to not be a slut; to make a living at an activity that fits the doer and causes no harm to others; not to take what's not freely given; and to avoid being a buffoon on account of too much drink or drugs. These principles are loosely part of the Eightfold Path, in which moderation in

all things is the motto; Nancy Reagan wouldn't do well here. The Buddha, having been a man of extremes, balanced into the middle way.

It could be argued that to be a journalist is to suffer; that most of what one covers involves someone else's suffering; that one takes the journalistic path and reports the story with a clear, unbiased mind (empty, in Buddhistic terms); that the story is inevitably about some kind of suffering, and the path to end one's immediate suffering is to meet deadline, brilliantly, and share this information with listeners/viewers/readers, thereby alleviating theirs.

In the preface to her 1976 collection of interviews and commentaries, *Interview With History*, Oriana Fallaci, a hard-boiled sort of interviewer, reveals her softer side:

Journalism is an extraordinary and terrible privilege. Not by chance, if you are aware of it, does it consume you with a hundred feelings of inadequacy. Not by chance, when I find myself going through an event or an important encounter, does it seize me like anguish, a fear of not having enough eyes and enough ears and enough brains to look and listen and understand like a worm hidden in the wood of history. I do not exaggerate, you see, when I say that on every professional experience I leave some of my soul. And it is not easy for me to say...for better or worse you'll contribute a little stone to help compose the mosaic; you'll provide information to help make people think.

We're suffering, the Buddha said, because we're unenlightened, we don't know who or what we are and so, without that knowledge, we're literally dumb-founded as to what to do. Journalists like to believe that they, like preachers, like saints and psychics, shed light on the dark passages of mind and spirit.

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The world delights in those with vision and integrity, those who do what it is right to do, who abide in the Dharma and speak only truth. – from *The Dhammapada* (spoken by the Buddha in the Bamboo grove)

Journalism, too, has standards of ethics, but these are voluntary; there is no taking of vows by journalists, though there are vows to be a Buddhist. There are voluntary agreements, put forth by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and other organizations and employers. Some of the tenets of the SPJ *Code of Ethics* dovetail quite nicely with those of Buddhism.

There are four sections to the Code: “Seek Truth and Report It,” “Minimize Harm,” “Act Independently,” and “Be Accountable.” The use of caps, as in titles, gives them a tract-like quality. Noble journalists shall rise from the ashes of the Cookes and Smiths and Glasses and Barnicles.

Each section head of the code lists an oath: “Journalists should.” Scary at the outset, a catechism for the press. But, as with nearly any holy writ, among the scary “thou shalt” business, some very fine, sensible scripture: “Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.” And the essential: “Keep promises.”

In the millenium, in the Second Coming, in the time when we have meditated so diligently, have consistently held the common good to heart and head, have applied our Bodhisattva selves toward public understanding, the *Code of Ethics* will have succeeded, under whatever organizational or individual guise.

May 4, 1998. The opening of Tibet House, a cultural center, in New York City. The Dalai Lama is officiating. After the ceremony, there is a question-and-answer session. As opposed to a press conference, here the questioners are supposed to be the dozen or so folks in the audience: folks the likes of Richard Gere and Philip Glass. I am on the floor, perhaps ten feet to the right of His Holiness. It’s my chance to ask him what he thinks is the relationship between

those who often practice the “ignoble truths” and those who practice Buddhism and pursue the Noble Truths.

His Holiness looks down at me and chuckles. He laughs a lot. He says, “I think you should know better.” I wonder if he means that I should know better than to ask such a question, or that as a journalist I am better able to answer the question. Either way, I demur, and he proceeds to answer the question in English. This, roughly, is what he said—at times, even with repeated listenings to the tape of the Dalai Lama’s response, I can’t quite

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make him out. (Noted Buddhist and Buddhist scholar Dr. Robert A. F. Thurman was, as he so often is in New York, at His Holiness’s right side, occasionally helping with English.)

But this I think much different motivation. And then generally I’m always telling media friends, in modern society, all the free society journalists have great great importance and responsibility and also I think very important commitment to Tibet, a very important role. Now it’s become quite clear I think one of the effective and best check in the society ... whether politician or religion or business, the really, what really happening, hmm. I think that’s your great social responsibility, I think provided should be very honest, very truthful! Then you should carry investigation as much as you can, very important. Usually I am telling my, the media people, you should have long nose, as long as elephant nose, elephant gosa [Robert Thurman says “trunk”] trunk, trunk or nose, I don’t know! I will use my own word, you see, elephant nose, ha ha! You see that nose should reach front as well as behind. Hmm. So,

you see, the try to make clear about truth. I think that’s similar Buddhist’s life.

In order to practice, in order to implement, first you need full knowledge about the truth. That we should know the good, that we should know the bad. So I think if you carry all this sense of responsibility, for the betterment of society, or protection of healthy society or the democratic system, I think that’s very much spiritual work. If you twist it some other reason, well then bad, very bad! Ha ha ha! I think inform to the society wrong, wrong information and also I think due to I dislike this person so I want to make bad story for them; I like this person I want to make it good story, that is negative, that is wrong, of course. Isn’t it?

Do you agree?

Of course, I nod and smile, and agree. I’m not a member of the Society of Professional Journalists. If I were, I’d say that’s a pretty good paraphrase of the tract, *The Code of Ethics*, I’d agreed to by sending in my dues.

May 11, 1998. My mother has just been diagnosed with esophageal cancer. In a few days she will have her seventy-sixth birthday, and the operation that will ultimately kill her within the month. There’s a 2”x3” piece of paper on the refrigerator door, affixed by a magnet in the shape of a slice of watermelon. My mother’s handwriting:

Buddhism, Nietzsche suggested, is a religion for a certain type of person: someone who can’t stand emotional intensity, interpersonal conflict, a boisterous social life or spicy foods.

Not a description of me, nor of most journalists.

Today, another chance opening of a text, though the road leads only to my studio. *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*. I take a pinch of what hasn't been freely given, and pick up the sentence atop the page from its beginnings at the bottom of the one before. And read:

Form is emptiness, emptiness indeed is form. Emptiness is not different from form, form is not different from emptiness. What is form that is emptiness, what is emptiness that is form. Thus perception, name, conception and knowledge also are emptiness. Thus, O Sariputra, all things have the character of emptiness, they have no beginning, no end, they are faultless and not faultless, they are not imperfect and not perfect. Therefore, O Sariputra, here in this emptiness there is no form, no perception, no name, no concept, no knowledge. No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. No form, sound, smell, taste, touch and objects. There is no eye...

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There is I. (What journalist has neither eye nor I?) The I who begins each day with a prayer called "Generating the Mind for Enlightenment." It concludes, "As long as space remains, as long as sentient beings remain, may I too remain, and dispel the miseries of the world." A fit credo, it seems, for journalists as well as Buddhists.