

1.

I first met Anitya Pal the monk on a summer afternoon at a small Buddhist temple on the outskirts of the town of Banepa, Nepal. Banepa is not a famous place--among travellers it is known mainly as a transit point and service centre for buses making their way along the Arniko highway to Tibet, which emerges from the Himalayas only a few hours away. Among Nepalis the town is recognized for its large number of schools, which serve the greater district of Kavre. Groups of smartly uniformed students are a common sight, making their way between the town and neighbouring villages. Banepa is also a destination for pilgrims, with the temple to the goddess Chandeshwori (Parvati) located on the banks of the Punya Mata river, just outside of town. Surrounded by the rolling hills and rice paddies of central Nepal, the feeling of Banepa remains deeply rural, deeply traditional--with the exception, of course, of its main drag and bus station, which is a typical modern chaos of shouting, honking, and revving engines.

Having passed through Banepa many times before, I had decided, this day, to get off the bus and do a bit of exploring. I'd been wandering the side streets for some time, lost in thoughts, when I came across a dilapidated little temple complex, innocuously situated on the other side of a brick wall I had somehow found myself following. Rounding a corner, suddenly there was an archway and a signboard in *Devan!gar*

"Um... okay."

We walked over to the temple, introducing ourselves as we went. He said that he was the sole occupant of this hermitage and had been living here for three years. I told him that I was not, in fact, simply a tourist but worked as a volunteer in the neighbouring town of Dhulikhel. I would, however, still like to see the temple, as I was very interested in Buddhism.

"Yes. Buddhism true teaching. Hinduism no good."

The bluntness of the monk's sudden pronouncement surprised me, to say nothing of its uninvited nature--but I concurred politely with a smile. One thing was certain though. This man was not a Nepali. No Nepali would be so forthright in dismissing the state religion. His accent was strange too. "Where are you from?" I asked.

"Assam. India."

"I'm from Canada," I said, as he unlocked the door into the temple. I followed him in, removing the chappals from my feet before entering. We came directly into the main shrine room. This was a largely featureless affair save for a mid-sized statue of the Buddha, which sat on a shelf halfway up the wall facing the doorway. Anitya Pal knelt and touched his head to the floor before the image of his teacher; I followed suit. The stone felt cool on my forehead.

The monk stood up. "This is temple."

"Yes. Very nice." I stepped forward to examine the Buddha. He was simply carved out of solid stone, sitting in classic meditation posture with his right hand touching the earth, the *bhumi-sparsa*. I turned back to the monk.

"We sit here," he said, pulling a hand-woven fibre mat from a darkened corner of the room. "No hot here." It was in fact rather pleasantly cool. We sat facing each other.

"You are having questions?" he asked. He seemed eager that I should ask him something. And so we talked. His voice was animated; his English broken and rapid. I learned that his time in Nepal was nearly up and that he was looking forward to an imminent return to his native Assam. The monk clearly took great pleasure in conversation--he liked to practice his English whenever he had a chance, he said. But as we spoke I sensed an undertone of loneliness.

I told him of my interest in Buddhism. "I studied Philosophy and Eastern Religions in university back home. But now that I'm living here it seems like everything I learned from my textbooks is irrelevant or just plain wrong. It's completely different from what I read. I never realized how important astrology is, for example. Everybody here has to check everything against the stars -- business decisions, travel, government, everything ... And nobody seems to meditate. I thought meditation would be a bigger part of people's lives."

"Meditation very important."

“Yes, everyone says so. But nobody seems to actually meditate. Even some of the monks I’ve met don’t seem to meditate very much. I visited the Burmese monastery down in Bodh Gaya. The monks I saw there just passed their time hanging around and smoking beedies.”

“Yes, lazy monks. No good. You are practicing meditation?”

“No, actually--not really,” I said sheepishly. “I don’t really know how.”

“You learn meditation. Meditation very important.”

“I’d like to, but I’ve never had proper instruction. Only from books. I think I need a teacher. Reading books about meditation is pretty useless.”

“What books you are reading?”

“Right now, I’m reading one called *Hidden Mind of Freedom*, by Tarthang Tulku.” I reached into my shoulder bag and pulled it out. “Do you know it?”

The monk took the book, looked at the cover for a moment and then handed it back. “You take class, learn meditation.”

“I’ve talked with some of the Buddhist teachers in Kathmandu; they give meditation classes. I might take one of those.”

“Which teacher?”

"Mah!y!nas--many gods, just like Hindus. You learn Therav!da--pure Buddha-dhamma."

"Gods? Oh, you must mean *bodhisattvas*. Like Mañju"rī, or Tara? Yes, there are many of those in Mah!y!na. But they are not really gods, are they? I mean, aren't they more like Buddhas?"

"Only one Buddha! Buddha human being, no god! You learn Therav!da--pure Buddha-dhamma."

Anitya Pal looked sceptical. I continued slowly. "Zzzzen is Buddha-dharma, made in Japan. Zzzzen is only meditation. No gods. Jainism is a different Indian religion beginning around the same time as Buddha, 500 years BC. Yes, maybe Jainism has many gods, or just one maybe, I think.

word Zen is just Japanese for the Sanskrit word for meditation, *dhy!na*. Look..." I wrote the words *dhy!na*, *Chan* and *Zen*.

"Do you know *dhy!na*?"

"Oh yes, *dhy!na*, Sanskrit. Same as *jh!na*, Pali word. Meditation"

"Yes. Right. Now, look... *Dhy!na* becomes 'Chan' in Chinese, and then 'Zen' in Japanese. Zen is a Japanese Buddhist tradition that teaches meditation, not devotion to gods."

Anitya pal was quiet as he examined at the words I had written. We were finally making some progress. After a moment he spoke.

"This-- Zzen..." he said slowly, clearly trying to enunciate the 'Z', "...this, Mah!y!na. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Mah!y!na, Hinduism. So.... Zen, Hinduism." Q.E.D! He smiled triumphantly.

I wanted to laugh. Back to Mah!y!na Hinduism! It was clearly pointless to continue on this track. But I wasn't sure how to get off, at least politely. Fortunately Anitya Pal did the work for me.

"You like Christian-dharma?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't believe in God," I said. Relief--this was an easy topic.

"Christian-dharma, Buddha-dharma same thing."

I stared at the monk incredulously. "You believe this?"

Anitya Pal spoke more rapidly now, "Yes. Christian-dharma, Buddha-dharma same thing. Jesus Christ teaching only loving neighbour, do not kill, and living peacefully. Lord Buddha also teaching loving-kindness meditation for everyone, do not kill, and living peacefully. So Buddha-dharma, Christian-dharma same thing." The monk looked gleeful. His eyes had widened; they regarded me like those of a puppy who has just dropped a stick at one's feet.

"But how...?" I began.

"Only loving-kindness teaching."

"Yes, but.... Okay, I can see what you mean; yes, ethically, I guess Jesus and Buddha may perhaps have taught the same thing in some ways, pretty much.... Still you have to admit that Christians believe in God. And an eternal soul too. So maybe same thing for behaviour, but not same thing for big picture of universe."

"No. Same big picture."

"Same big picture?"

"Yes."

"But how? Buddha-dharma has no God."

"Yes -- no God."

"But Christianity has God."

"Yes."

"Then how same big picture?"

Anitya Pal appeared to think for a moment.

"Is contradiction, yes?"

I nodded. The monk was smiling. His eyes sparkled.

"Contradiction o

The Mah!y!na holds forth a new religious ideal. This is the figure of the bodhisattva, a heroic figure who strives to become a fully enlightened Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings. Bodhisattvas choose to forgo their own final entry into nirvana until all other beings have been brought to this state. They work tirelessly for this goal of universal liberation. The ideal of the H#nay!na, by contrast, is that of the Arhat or "Worthy one," someone who has completely purified his mind and attained nirvana, never to be reborn. The Arhat doesn't wait around for anyone else, much less everyone else.

Although the Mah!y!na aspiration struck me as technically impossible--there would after all, always be new suffering beings around for the bodhisattva to rescue--I found myself attracted to its universalism and noble sentiment, paradoxical as they were. On the other hand again many of the Tibetan practices felt alien to me, steeped in the imagery and symbolism of a culture that was not my own.

I decided to present my dilemma to Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche himself. I showed up at his monastery without an appointment.

The monastery of Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling is a five minute walk inside the main gates of the Tibetan refugee settlement of Boudhanath, located on the perimeter of Kathmandu. The settlement is a maze of scattered dwellings, shops and monasteries, which has evolved into a cluttered collection of haphazardly connected clusters loosely arranged in concentric circles radiating out from the central fact and object of the place: the giant stupa of Boudhanath. The massive white dome of this reliquary is surmounted by a bright golden box with the painted eyes of the Buddha gazing out serenely in all directions. Myriad lines of prayer flags stream and flutter down from its spire to the ground below, where a seemingly unending stream of pilgrims circumambulate its circumference, turning prayer wheels and chanting *Aum Mani Padme Hum* as they go. The faith is palpable, with sound and incense mingling in the air like milk and water. The entire cultural thrum and vibe of the place is distinctly Tibetan; as one enters through the main gates at the base of the stupa there is a shift. One has left Nepalese society. The Tibetans in Nepal are visitors who have been allowed to stay; they have made Boudhanath their own.

When I arrived at the monastery a friendly monk asked me to wait in the hallway outside the main meditation hall. I was soon led in.

Rinpoche was speaking animatedly on a cordless telephone as I entered. I bowed three times before him, awkwardly following the custom. The practice of prostrating before the guru always felt forced to me. I found it too devotional

which we sat. Magnificently detailed frescoes of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, wrathful and peaceful deities covered the walls. Thousands upon thousands of seated Buddha figures smiled beneficently down from their celestial spheres. Light streamed through long open windows and thick red curtains; the earthy scent of Tibetan incense hung in the air.

"Yes, yes... I see," he was saying. "Then sell it! Of course! Don't worry." I waited. Scanning the heavens.

After some time, Rinpoche hung up.

"Mr. Canada!" he exclaimed.

"Hello, Rinpoche."

"What can I do for you today?"

"Well, I wanted some more information about that meditation course you're teaching in October."

"Yes?"

"What kind of meditation does it involve?"

"Did you read my book?"

"Yes, thank you. I enjoyed it very much."

"Well, that is the course! Very similar."

"Oh, I see.... Rinpoche, there's another problem I wanted to ask you about. There's a different course I want to take as well--but it's being taught at the same time as yours. I can't do both."

He laughed. "What course?"

"It's something called 'Vipassana', taught by a man named Goenka. He is not a monk, he's an

"Easy--make a choice!" He laughed again.

"My problem is that everything I read about Mah!y!na philosophy I find to be more appealing than H#nay!na. Emptiness teachings, great compassion... all of that. But I don't think Therav!da is necessarily H#nay!na. I mean, if a person is enlightened, isn't it irrelevant what tradition they are part of? Enlightenment must be the same for everyone, mustn't it? The scriptures always say that enlightenment has 'one taste,' don't they?"

"Yes."

"And in fact, I find that some western practitioners of Mah!y!na are actually just reinforcing their egos by dismissing Therav!da as necessarily narrow and self-centred."

"Then those individuals have misunderstood Mah!y!na. One cannot practice Mah!y!na without H#nay!na."

"But even the idea that H#nay!na is a "necessary preliminary" for Mah!y!na is a bit condescending, isn't it?"

"Is it... necessarily?"

"I'm not sure I understand."

"H#nay!na really means small motivation, not Therav!da. There are many Therav!da Mahayanists. And there are many followers of Mah!y!na who are H#nay!na. It is the motivation that matters, not this tradition or that tradition."

"So the label is just a label? But doesn't the label we choose matter? I've never heard of a Theravadin who calls himself Mah!y!na. Or, for that matter, *anyone* who calls himself H#nay!na," I said, smiling.

Chokyi Nyima laughed. "Yes, no one calls himself H#nay!na. Good."

"So why use the label then? Doesn't it just cause hurt feelings?"

"Label is useful for making distinctions, but not important. Motivation is important."

"I understand that Mah!y!na is supposed to be all about being concerned with the suffering of others, not just oneself. I understand that. But if you really want to help others don't you have to take care of yourself first?"

"Yes, is that what you think?"

"I think so. But I have to think about it some more actually. It's not clear to me. On the one hand you could think that concentrating on yourself is selfish or small-minded, but if you recognise that others' suffering is no different than your own, you could still be a Mahayanist. You can't

really help others if your own mind is confused; you just create more confusion. You have to begin by cleaning up your own backyard--or so it seems to me.”

“Good!”

I hesitated.

“Rinpoche, there’s one more thing I wanted to ask you about. I find that many of the practices associated with Mah!y!na Buddhism feel very foreign to me. Visualizations, chanting and such, they don't suit me. I like the simple kinds of meditation like watching the breath or just sitting -- like in Zen.”

"Then *Dzog chen* meditation would be good for you, it is similar to Zen. That is part of the course I teach.”

"But is there any chanting, or visualization p

“Well, some of them say that it can turn a person into a kind of observer-robot. Just impassively