

Dear Friend,

Many years ago, on an uposatha night of the fifteenth of Vesakha like this, a young man became a Buddha, an 'Awakened One'. It was out of faith for that Buddha that I left home two years ago. Tonight, in my small kuti in this forest monastery, against His compassionate advice, I'm hankering over the past, and I wonder what you are doing. What it must be like out there. How you are faring in the game of survival. Whether the world has shackled you down and whether – I can afford to hope – you sometimes feel like breaking those shackles and fleeing. Like us dropouts here. Like the nuns in the sister monastery. Like Siddhattha Gotama.

But it is improper of me to make assumptions – perhaps you don't find things bad at all. Even if we share the same outlook, time is already building a wall between us. Soon we will be so far apart we wouldn't meet even in thought. Before we disappear in to our own separate worlds, let me share some ideas with you. Perhaps they might be useful – if not now, later.

The big questions come easily when we are small. You know, the ones that are about 'life, the universe and everything'. The ones about birth and death and the meaning(lessness) of it all. It's a pity the answers are not so readily apparent, but at least in our childish innocence we are not afraid to keep asking the questions. I remember how, as a kid, I asked my mother why we even bother doing anything at all if it all just ends in death. Obviously she wasn't very happy with that, and advised me not to think about such things. In saying so she was only following the norm; being a well-adjusted productive citizen requires such self-induced anaesthesia. As we grow up, we become more and more like the adults who guide us. Too involved with life to ask those fundamental questions. Too serious about the inessential. Too busy being wage slaves.

Not only do we deceive ourselves with a false sense of security about our own existence, we also readily buy in to the massive web of deception that constitutes our social context – the lies that make up the ruthless modern world we live in. We hardly have time to find out or reflect on what the machine is doing as we act out our role of being a tiny cog in an obscure corner. As we wallow in our blessed ignorance, in some other corner, the cruel machinery of 'globalization' – just a fancy label for neo-liberal capitalism driven by the corporatocracy – sends a brother, a sister, an entire population to the chopping block. Sedated by the propaganda of the corporate media, we don't hear their cries of pain, anguish, despair; their cries for help as they are being sacrificed on the altar of 'progress'. But whether we know it or not, when it's time, our turn will come. And then it would be *our* cries of pain, anguish, despair as we are being 'liberated' by the Empire. Yet, apart from sheer magnitude of scope and unprecedented efficiency in execution, there's nothing new in this New World Order from what humanity has put up with in the past. It's the same old wine of greed, hatred and delusion, in an irresistibly attractive new bottle.

So there it is: a problem within and a problem without. For too long have we ignored it, at our own peril. It takes honesty and courage to face up to it – qualities that we can nurture within ourselves, if we care. And with a determined effort, we *can* escape from this whole mass of suffering, following the instructions of the first to do so in our times, the Blessed One Gotama. The going forth, the shaven head, the ochre robe – these are but the outward manifestations of our decision. They symbolize our priorities and create an identity for our community of 'escapists'. Even though we ourselves haven't yet reached the goal, the community – the Sangha – stands for the possibility of it. And on seeing us, others develop a longing for the quest. Some of them join us.

I hope you would be one of them.

May you regain your childish innocence. May you ask the difficult questions. May you escape.

Best wishes,
Bhikkhu Yogananda
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