

### *Contemplating the Buddha - from Riche du Plessis*

Varanasi is not an easy city to understand. Its myriad of narrow, winding streets, cobbled and scattered with potholes, cow dung and the evidence of a thousand years or more of human habitation, are home to Hindi pilgrims from across the sub continent. They come here to bathe in the waters of the Ganga and to receive both the blessings of their Lord Shiva and release from the cycle of rebirth. Smoke from the riverside crematoriums hangs over the city. I followed a funeral procession through the streets of the ancient city yesterday and attended a cremation at the edge of the river. I was told that the burning process takes three hours and that the ashes are then scattered into the river.

Afterwards, walking away from the Ganges, I stopped to photograph four pilgrims, dressed in orange, long white beards flowing, sitting cross legged on the road with a bowl in front of them, they cooperated and showed grace as I placed a five rupee coin in the bowl. Evidence of their faith in the Lord Shiva was unmistakable.

It is July, the start of the monsoon season in India, and heavy rain fell as I attended the evening festival of light and water at the edge of the Ganges. Priests in flowing orange and gold robes rang bells and lit fire pots to attract the attention of Shiva. They chanted mantras, translated, for my benefit, by my guide. 'Let there be peace, let there be fellowship, let their be understanding between all, Om urri om, Shivananda.'

As a prayer, I could not argue with that.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century appears to have bypassed Varanasi. The old city is in an obvious state of decay. Many buildings are crumbling. The streets, not wide enough for motorcars, are crowded beyond description. Cows, people, cyclo-rickshaws, motorbikes all vie for space. The noise of hooters, bells, voices, 2-stroke engines, fills the air. There is no place where one can be alone. Physical solitude is impossible. The only silence has to be within oneself. And I believe that the pilgrims find the silence they are here to search for. As Einstein stated: 'The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.'

Without doubt Varanasi, and the practices one sees here, is mysterious.

Only eleven kilometers away is the village of Sarnath. Once a separate principality, Sarnath is now incorporated into the sprawl of Varanasi. Yet, within the very lush and green of its fields and lawns, Sarnath retains the peaceful, quiet atmosphere that may have attracted Sidharta, the Buddha, for it was here that he preached his first lesson to his five attentive followers.

The lesson, engraved in granite, is here for all to read.

Sidharta, born to a wealthy and princely family, much like Saint Francis, gave away all his possessions in his search for meaning. This occurred during a period of great turmoil in India. The Brahmins had taken control of religious teaching. Traditionally the 'teachers', their position was, at first, not questioned. They proceeded to establish a new order, claiming the farming, artisan and labouring classes to be 'untouchable'. The Untouchables were ejected from society, not permitted to eat in public, not permitted to worship in public, not permitted free association with those 'above them'. This obviously led to a division in society; those who had much, and those who had nothing. The Jain philosophy developed and grew amongst the Untouchables to counter the influence of Brahminism. It was in this environment that the Buddha received enlightenment.

His philosophy, described in India as 'the middle way', that is midway between Brahminism and Jainism, largely states;

- 1: that one should neither have too much nor too little,
- 2: 'that you yourself, as much as anybody in the universe, deserve your love and affection'

The first could, politically, be interpreted as a statement suggesting greater equality during a difficult period of social and economic turmoil. The second statement could be interpreted as a call to the Untouchables, saying that, though they may have little, they should retain faith in themselves. Seen from a political perspective, both are very relevant to their times. Perhaps it is time to 'de-mystify' the Buddha.

I put this argument to a Hindi companion yesterday. He instinctively realized, I think, that I am a non-believer. 'Ah, you see my friend, it does not matter if you believe or not. For being religious is a one-sided affair. It doesn't matter to God if you believe in him or not. It matters only to us.' With this point of view in mind, I feel that I can write whatever I like.

Aristotle argued that, basically, humans are 'rational animals'. I find this difficult to accept. Yesterday I watched the spiritual Hindi festivals on the edge of the Ganga, this morning rituals at the Buddhist temple at Sarnath. I can't call the behaviour of the observed humans at either festival rational. Neither can I call the practices of the Christian church rational. Belief in some unseen, formidable and all-controlling, all wise God is not, in my view, rational behaviour. Yet, the 'Middle way' as taught by Buddha, certainly is rational, when seen from a socio-political perspective. But, of course, it all depends on one's understanding of 'rational'.

If 'rational' means, *understanding and living by the rules of logic*, then the obvious fact of our numerical thriving on this planet, would indicate that humans are rational. Why then, in our diverse spiritual practices, and despite the 'rationality' of the initial message from the sage, are we so 'irrational' Could it be that so many people believe fervently in and follow patently ridiculous practices, without which their lives might not have sufficient meaning. Then of course, seeing the billions of poverty stricken people of India, it could be argued that numerical proliferation of humans is not 'thriving'. Perhaps a truly 'rational' populace might cut down the rate of propagation of its own species.

The Buddha was following a rational, socio-political path when he announced, to an audience of Untouchables, that 'all nations and races should be taught to respect those .. compassionate ones who have renounced all that life holds dear and have gone forth to champion the cause of their fellow creatures...' The Buddha struggled with the religious intolerance of his day and championed the cause of the common people, condemning all extremes. He taught that ignorance is the cause of all worldly misery and that only self-knowledge, and the knowledge of the relationship of self to the 'Great Plan' can combat this ignorance. That, if humans could see clearly (or rationally?) they would 'do right'.

His basic four truths are of great interest.

*'To exist as a separate personality predestines suffering and sorrow.'*

This is, to my mind, a rational fact. It argues that there is an inter-relationship, not only amongst all humans, but with all that exists in the universe, and even beyond. All actions, Einstein stated, create an equal but opposite reaction. This is from his Theory of Relativity. In the time of the Buddha, it could be seen as an argument against the divisions that existed in the society.

*'The greatest cause of misery is the desire to possess and the desire to preserve things possessed.'*

Once again, this is an obvious socio-political call aimed directly at the two extremes of the society in which he preached; The Untouchables who possessed little, but envied the wealthy, and the Brahmins who possessed much and guarded their wealth.

*'Freedom from suffering is attained by the slaying of all desire save that for right knowledge.'*

Spiritually, one can see from this 'truth', when read in conjunction with the one above, that attachment to possessions is the basis for fear. Mother Teresa stated 'The more you have, the more you are occupied, the less you give.' Within the context of the social environment of his time, this can again be interpreted as a call, directed to both Brahmins and Untouchables, for a redirection of effort, away from physical desires or possessions, to a search for self-knowledge, or freedom.

*'The way of liberation and to the cessation of all opposites is the noble eightfold path, the way of immortality'*

I won't, in this letter, continue to the eightfold path. But it is apparent to me that, in this *truth*, the Buddha is referring to the extreme opposites (wealth and poverty, inequality) of his society, arguing that '*liberation*' (of each individual within the society) can be found only in the '*cessation of all opposites*' (Brahmins vs Untouchables) and arguing that '*immortality*' (or could he be referring to a just society?) will only be found once a better socio-political is found.

One should remember that Sidharta was the son of a king. As such he must have matured in a political environment. Decisions of State must have constantly been made in front of and around him. He could not have avoided growing up in a politically orientated household. His later announcements could be seen as socio-economic-political statements.

His four basic truths are, within this context, rational.

Buddhism, after becoming a major force in India, rivaled the State beliefs of Hinduism. Once again political pressures were brought to bear, causing Buddhism to depart from India. Although it is today the major spiritual philosophy of the world, only small pockets of followers remain in India.

India has reverted to, or is still, a country of haves and have-nots. The man who pedals the cyclo-rickshaw works incredibly hard for perhaps three hundred rupees per day. Of this he pays the owner of the rickshaw one hundred, and is responsible for the maintenance of the bicycle. He and his family live on what remains- perhaps Rupees 180, (less than \$5) for rent, food and education. On my ride to the Ganga, he vied for space on the overcrowded streets with a new, white Mercedes. Both drivers undress and plunge waist deep into the muddy waters of the Ganga to wash away their sins, give praise to the Lord Shiva, and believe that they have now broken the cycle of re-birth.

India, though incredible, is not rational.