

Beauty, Mindfulness & Raw Sewage

Guest blog appearing on a website that sold products related to meditation and eastern philosophy.

Beauty, Mindfulness & Raw Sewage: Lessons from Bangkok

I wandered the kingdom of Thailand in the Spring of 2008, from the southern islands in the Andaman Sea to the mountains of the Golden Triangle where Thailand, Myanmar and Laos converge. I began my trip careening through the streets of Bangkok and Chiang Mai on Tuk Tuks – those three wheeled go-carts that double as Taxis. My journey led me to a bamboo hut in a mountain village so remote that it could only be reached on the back of an elephants.

Thailand, like much of the developing world, is a nation of contrasts. The rural landscape offers a calming escape from the incessant buzz of Bangkok, which can overwhelm even the hardiest nervous system. Overrun with pink taxis and motorbikes, the smell of Diesel mixes with the noxious odor of raw sewage. The smell permeates even smaller cities like Chiang Rai throughout the hot season, when rivers of waste bake in the southern Asian sun.

Buddhist temples found every few blocks provide a respite from the chaos. Walk into any temple that isn't overrun by tourists – the less conspicuous and ornate, the better – and the commotion whirls down to a gentle hum. The sun dances on the shiny mosaic of sparkling red, green and gold shingles covering the roofs of Thai temples – a spectacle that photographs never quite bring to life. Monks smile as they pass, bringing their palms together and bowing their heads in the traditional Thai greeting that honors the Buddha nature in everyone. The breeze caresses the wind chimes, gently nudging us toward the present. This theme repeated itself throughout my travels – exhaustion and renewal juxtaposed back to back, from one moment to the next.

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I assumed that I would never get used to the stench of raw sewage. Our natural aversion to toxic odors is our body's way of saying, "Stay away!" Yet, months after my return I found myself stepping over a sewer in downtown San Francisco when a fleeting waft of that same, putrid smell arose from the bowels of the city. Instead of disgust, I was flooded with a blend of nostalgia and excitement, transporting me back to Thailand. Marcel Proust called this phenomenon "involuntary memory." As an adult, he bit into a Madeleine that swept him back to the innocence of childhood, as though he were sitting once again in his grandmother's kitchen, eating the sweet pastry that tethered him to his youth.

If something so viscerally repugnant as the smell of raw sewage could evoke wanderlust and anticipation, I wondered – what other smells, tastes and images that normally antagonize the senses might inspire joy and peace with a simple shift in perspective and a dash of mindfulness?

I live in the Rockridge district of Oakland, California, a quiet neighborhood at the base of lush, green hills, surrounded by tree-lined streets and quaint shops. I regularly pass through the industrial zone

of West Oakland on BART (San Francisco's light rail system) en route to the city by the bay. As a child, I was intrigued by the novelty of a landscape that so sharply contrasted my sheltered suburban existence. Factories puffing white smoke into the air and rusty old warehouses intrigued me, especially when viewed from the safety of a BART train. I once saw beauty in West Oakland because my egoic mind had yet to define and label it. Today, my perception has given way to adult, bourgeois sensibilities and West Oakland has become just another stop on the way to San Francisco.

The realities of crime and poverty notwithstanding, my brush with raw sewage inspired me to rethink my relationship with this maze of concrete and soot. Early one September morning, sitting in thick traffic underneath a bundle of freeway overpasses in the *other* city by the bay, I made a decision to focus my attention wholly on the present. Breathing deeply with eyes open wide, I glimpsed a sudden splash of light dancing along the underbelly of a freeway overpass.

Or did I? Was it a flashback from my illustrious youth? I fixed my gaze on the overpass – hallucinations can't withstand such scrutiny. Nothing... nothing... nothing... then...

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The top of a city bus, passing underneath the overpass, reflected the golden rays of autumn sunlight on that filthy concrete slab, transforming a 20th century symbol of utilitarian ugliness onto a charcoal canvas that housed, for an instant, an accidental work of art.

I realized with stark clarity that crisp autumn morning that beauty cannot be obscured. Beauty cannot be repressed. Lurking just below the surface of our industrial wastelands, beauty is bursting through the seams.