

KA-SENSEI'S LOVE-BITE

'*Ka ga imasu!*' I complained, as the monk lead me into a sparsely decorated Zen temple.

'*Imasu ne,*' he said matter-of-factly. 'Indeed, there are mosquitoes'. 'Indeed, mosquitoes exist', but I wasn't getting any sympathy from him, nor any chitchat. He bade me sit down in lotus facing the wall and picked up his kindly stick, a meter rule used to beat distracted Buddhists. He lit a stick of incense, and I began to meditate as he paced loudly behind me - *teku teku teku*, a pause as he turned, then *teku teku teku* as he paced back again.ⁱ For a few minutes it was just the footsteps, the wall, and I, conspiring to convince me that 'I' doesn't exist, but then we were joined by the whine of a mosquito.

There are many kinds of mosquitoes in Japan, including tiny, barely audible ones, long spindly buggers who can stab through your clothes, and pretty black and white stripy ones. This one was a particularly loud species, a veritable helicopter of a parasite. I could hear herⁱⁱ leisurely meandering across the temple as her bald accomplice patrolled, ready to strike if I moved. *Teku teku teku...* Pause... *Teku teku teku*.

She landed on my neck to feed, and I winced, unable to slap at her without completely disgracing myself. I tried to concentrate on the *koan*, or riddle the monk had given me at our first meeting. 'Meaning is no meaning'. It meant precisely nothing to me. I had chosen to train at a

ⁱ The noise of a footstep. Japanese has great onomatopoeia.

ⁱⁱ This is not misogyny; only pregnant females bite.

Soto temple specifically because they do not use *koan*, which I suspected would not help me. I'm always full of questions, but I can't imagine caring enough about anything to think about it constantly for years on end, to the exclusion of everything else. The monk gave me a *koan* anyway, but I wasn't up for it, and I directed my focus towards the wall in the normal Soto manner. Since then spring mosquitoes had sprung into action, and now my concentration was one-pointed on the one drinking my blood. Was this a special temple species, a big, slow moving blood-tank of an insect adapted to life in symbiosis with the kindly stick, in a world where dinner sits still. *Teku teku teku.*

The mozzie finished her starter and began speculating around my face and forearms. Zen meditators sit with eyes half-open somewhere between the internal and external worlds, so I could follow her movements. Eventually she settled on my wrist. I could almost feel her weight as well as the tiny prick promising days of itchiness. She sat motionless and heavy as the Buddha as I squirmed. *Teku teku teku.* How did Gautama's tradition of sitting meditation arise in a mosquito-infested valley in India, before the invention of the mosquito net? Is the incense to keep the bastards away? Is this the wisdom in the whirl of the Dervish? I wondered whether the mosquito I had killed in Mexico at the climax of a magickal rite was taking revenge by interrupting my attempts at bliss from the place where mosquitoes go when they are sacrificed. I wondered if I could bring a mosquito net next time. *Teku teku teku.* Perhaps there wouldn't be a next time.

Finally, many tense breaths later, she rose into the air. I breathed a mindful, blissful sigh of relief, and returned my attention to the wall. She buzzed around for a moment, and then landed on the flesh between my left thumb and index finger. Her greed was insatiable. Her manners were unforgivable. *Teku teku teku.* Bugger off and bite the monk, for the Buddha of Compassion's sake! *Teku teku teku.* What impertinence, biting the same Zennist three times! What impudence, inserting her proboscis at the one feeding spot where I could squash her with a barely perceptible adjustment of the mudra! In Zen meditation, one hand rests on the other, with thumbs touching. What a position to put me into, little insect! The first Buddhist precept forbids taking a life, but I was no Buddhist. The fourth noble truth is to meditate upon the paths, and this parasite was making this impossible. It is said that if you meet the Buddha on the path, kill him, but what about mosquitoes? If the Buddha is everywhere, he is also in the mosquito, which is in my way on the path, so maybe I **can** kill her. The rabbis were debating in the temple as the mosquito leisurely supped... *teku teku teku...* and supped... *teku teku teku.* I waited for the monk to

pause, and unleashed my Shaolin Buddha finger on her. *Teku teku teku...*

Squish...

...*Smack*. The kindly stick came down on my shoulder.

It is a relief when it comes, bringing you back to the moment, back to the object. It is also called the silent yell, and it reminds you where you are and what you are doing. The pain in your legs evaporates, and the story in your head melts away. My major concern was now nothing more than a red smudge, so I could finish the session in peace, with nothing more troubling than a slightly guilty conscience.

Twenty minutes later I sat rubbing my aching legs as the monk chain-smoked cigarettes. I asked him why he used *koan* in a Soto temple. He ignored my question, and asked me what Japanese food I liked. I questioned him about how to deal with mosquitoes. He asked me what sports I play, and then whether I enjoyed saké. He was either being very Zen or he didn't really care, and I suspect the latter. Many monks are more civil servants than holy men in Japan, the job passes from father to son. I once asked my pupil if he would become a monk like his father, and he explained that he wanted to be a baseball player, but would become a monk if he didn't make it. My monk clearly liked his saké, and this is not uncommon in Japan, despite the Buddhist precept to avoid drink and drugs which befuddle the mind. I was invited to a monk party once in a bar, where red-faced Japanese monks slurred at their Tibetan drunken master until he staggered to a taxi. As soon as he left, they nearly all reached into their robes for their cigarettes. He drank like a mountain fish, but he taught that smoking obstructed an invisible channel in the body. He was a great teacher, but my monk was not made of the same stuff. I suspect he broke with tradition and gave me the *koan* because it made his teaching role easier: 'just go away and think about this until you are enlightened.'

Everyone hates mosquitoes, but mosquitoes love us. They look at a bus-queue the way we look at a buffet. They see a genius and an idiot, a soul diva and a curmudgeonly Jehovah's Witness in the same way. We are attracted to amiable, beautiful people; the mosquito is attracted to overweight, sweaty males, and they have an ankle fetish. But Ka-sensei has a lot to teach us, more than cuddly bunny rabbits, and more than the Archbishop of Canterbury. Where they exist, they serve as a constant reminder that we are just another link in the food chain. Most of our frustration arises from misconceptions about our place in the

universe. We imagine the world was made to satisfy us. The mosquito knows we are here to satisfy her.

The best remedy for an itchy bite is good old Taoist non-action. Forget the creams and forget the itch, and it will pass soon enough. On the other hand, if you scratch, the wound can last for months, or if you are really lucky you might end up with a bacterial colony eating into your flesh, and threatening to digest your face. In the Mexican rainforest, they form a cloud around you wherever you go, and babies spend their first months crying until they become accustomed to the onslaught. I used to teach lessons to a slow, constant round of applause as the students slapped at their parasites. The teacher before me was a Mexican, who fled within a week of arriving, but I was determined to stick it out for three weeks. I was a big red itchy mess within days. Scratching gives a few seconds of delicious relief, followed by hours of torment, and the only thing to do is to stop it, or you will scratch all day. The bite of the mosquito holds the secret of mind over matter. It reminds us that life runs smoother when your will dominates the distractions of the senses.

When we slap at a mosquito, we strike at ourselves. We are inextricably linked to our environment, some of which irritates us, but it is part of us all the same. We spend a great deal of energy distancing ourselves from our surroundings. We try to make ourselves more comfortable and safer in the short term, but the long term consequences can be disastrous. Malaria is more than just irritating, it is the biggest killer on the planet, taking more than two lives each minute, but it protected us from ourselves for millennia. It obstructed European colonialists in the tropics. The stakes were upped with WWII, when battles were fought in the blood streams of soldiers. Two principle weapons against malaria were developed, the prophylactic Chloroquine and DDT, the first pesticide. Up until this time, attempts to develop the rainforests had been doomed to feverish failure, but after the war a chemically enhanced Bigfoot was unleashed, cutting highways to mine, to farm, to settle, and to log.

Before these chemicals came on the market, 15 percent of our planet's landmass was covered with rainforest. Deforestation began in Nepal shortly after WWII, and by 1980 half was gone.¹ Development of the Brazilian Amazon also began in the 1950s. By 1962, one percent had gone up in smoke, and today 20 percent has been cleared.² The WHO Global Malaria Eradication Programme began in 1955, speeding up the destruction and altering landscapes and weather patterns. Rainforests shelter half of the species on the planet, and they provide some of the oxygen we breathe. Ka-sensei held us in an irritating

balance, and we scratched our way out. It soon became clear that DDT kills not only mosquitoes but other animals as well, accumulating at the top of the foodchain. It was banned in the US in 1972, by which time the bald eagle population had dropped to less than 500 in the country it symbolises. Today malaria kills more than ever before and drug resistance is spreading, but humans are a far more devastating parasite.

Balance and order are intrinsic to the world, but meaning is imposed. A bite itches so it is bad. Chloroquine saves lives so it is good. Malaria kills which means it is bad, and should be eradicated. DDT kills bugs so it is good. Americans worked out that DDT spells trouble, and the bald eagle has started to recover, but this chemical is still used in many countries, including Brazil, where I am presently editing in a rainforest shack, swiping at the mosquitoes buzzing around me.

Meaning morphs as the picture unfolds, but there are meanies doctoring meaning for their advantage. Meaning shifts as it passes through institutions and the media, through the political system, and into the public domain, but it all begins in a brain. Bias is built into our linguistics and programmed into our neurobiology.¹ Meaning is no meaning, but with all this irritation buzzing around our heads, do we have the patience to sit still and meditate on the riddle before deciding we have the answer? Does a slap from the kindly planet do anything to fix our dreadful posture?

Not enough. Tibetan Buddhists today honour the cycle of birth and death as in ancient times in their funeral rites, leaving monks' corpses out on towers, but today they rot slowly as there are not enough vultures to eat them. The DDT tragedy is being repeated with Diclofenac, a drug used in cattle farming, which proved to be toxic to vultures. Since it was introduced in the early nineties, the vulture population has plummeted by over 95 percent,³ but despite the explosion of rotting animal carcasses all over the sub-continent, the drug it is still sold in 92 percent of veterinary stockists in Pakistan.⁴ Once again, in 2008, the WHO is embarking on a massive anti-malaria program, with insecticides sprayed inside houses and impregnated into free mosquito nets. This shortsighted charity kills other insects as well as mosquitoes, impoverishing food chains, and it can't be very good for the humans sleeping inside the nets either. The program will cost around \$2 billion per year until... *teku teku teku...* until further notice,

¹ Later in *Neuro-apocalypse* we will explore the brain, and discuss how what we see is tinted, what we notice is skewed, what we remember is weighted, resulting in conscious awareness of only a tiny fraction of the whole.

because even the WHO has admitted that malaria can't be eradicated. The first eradication program nearly wiped out malaria in Sri Lanka, but not quite, so a generation of children grew up without exposure, and without developing immunity. The result was a massive resurgence, which today claims 10,000 victims each year.⁵

Can you hear the footsteps creeping across the temple? ... *teku teku teku*... The itch is becoming intense, but can we remain still, and keep our minds and bodies in check until we work through the riddle? ... *teku teku teku* ... The kindly stick is raised to strike, my fellow novices, but on whose neck will it fall? ... *teku teku teku* ... The Buddha finger is pointing, my friends, but is it pointing at you? *Teku teku te...*

...ku.

...Smack!

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1 *Nepal: Development Performance and Prospects* - A World Bank Country Study, South Asia Regional Office, World Bank, Washington, (1979) 'DC. 123 PP.

2 *Deforestation and Frontier Expansion in Brazilian Amazonia* - Diogenes S. Alves (Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais)

3 *Diclofenac residues as the cause of vulture population decline in Pakistan* - J. Lindsay Oaks et al. *Nature*, vol. 427, February 12th 2004

4 *Bird Life International*, 2006

5 *One quick shot may not be enough* in *The Economist*, April 12th, 2008