



Dropping Out, Like The Buddha, by Jane Brunette

In an age where being super busy is a badge of honor and accomplishing tasks the greatest virtue, where some activists promote rallies by quoting Martin Luther King saying, "For evil to succeed, all it needs is for good people to do nothing," I did the unthinkable. I dropped out.

I didn't like fighting, and I was getting depressed. One day it dawned on me: if I wanted peace, I had to stop making enemies. So I quit.

I'm in good company. The Buddha dropped out, too. He was the original hippie.

The Buddha was a prince who had it all: power, prestige, money, sensual pleasure, but all of these coveted things of the world seemed insignificant when he finally faced the reality of suffering, death, and impermanence. So he threw away his fabulous clothes and wandered off into the forest in search of deeper meaning.

I'm sure there were those in his kingdom who judged him, who thought his dropping out was selfish. Couldn't he do more good as a king than as a wandering yogi? What a waste. But the Buddha was looking for something more radical than helping the people in his kingdom achieve temporary prosperity. Like me, he wanted to end suffering.

So he dropped out and wandered. He tried all kinds of things to discover the truth. He was so passionate in his search, he even tried extreme austerities, fasting until he was skeletal, hoping it would push him to realization. Finally, when he was nearly starved and delirious, a milkmaid came by and said the obvious: "You're making yourself sick. Have some porridge."

I wonder if the milkmaid knew that her simple offer of comfort food provided the means to the Buddha's key insight. Maybe she promptly forgot about it -- just did a little kindness for a stranger, then went back to her cows. I don't think she gets enough credit. If the milkmaid hadn't stood firmly in her perspective and offered her humble truth, then the Buddha, in his dogged pursuit of the highest truth, might have ended up just another strung-out hippie, dead from

his excesses.

But lucky for us, the Buddha had some self-doubt. He listened deeply when she spoke, open to the possibility that she might know something he didn't. And then he ate the porridge. In doing so, he had a deep insight on which he based his philosophy of The Middle Way: it doesn't help to go to extremes. Better to cultivate balance. [...]

I don't enjoy self-doubt, but I think it's probably a good thing because it keeps the inquiry alive: I know that I might be wrong. That alone is an achievement, considering how convinced I used to be that my perspective was always morally right and the most true. In fact, [now] I'm pretty sure that deep down, none of us really knows if what we are doing will ultimately help or hurt. Can we admit that and still do our best with what we have?

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