

Eastern scriptures refer to humans of various calibers—ranging from the stubborn thick-headed one who clings to certain belief systems against all new data, to the bright spark who, at the merest flick of the divine whip, takes off down the highway to enlightenment like a thoroughbred stallion. And yet the reluctant student on the inner path is not necessarily low in terms of IQ; on the contrary, it is often the highly educated who are rigidly attached to comfort zones, to the extent that they do not even consider there is more to reality than what their senses evaluate as either good, bad or neutral.

My friend Joe was a highly intelligent academic but inflexible in his views—he clung to beliefs he considered right, no matter the objections I offered, and often pretended I had convinced him to reconsider his outlook. But, the next time we met, he'd offer the same old tired views, until I learned to just love him for the beautiful spirit he was, and to avoid all talk of metaphysics or spirituality.

MY FRIEND JOE & THE KARMA OF A DROWNING MAN

Joe was my oldest friend in Manhattan; he died recently, in his 90s. A professor of Economics who'd once taught at several Ivy League Colleges, Joe once confessed to me that in his days of youthful rebellion, he had come under the influence of a Russian Communist and been indoctrinated into that philosophy.

My own interest in mysticism baffled Joe. How can you follow such a heartless path, Mira? he once asked me, when I mentioned I was heading out of town for a meditation retreat. Surprised, I asked what he meant. Oh, Joe said, this Communist friend of mine told me a story—a true story, mind you!—about two Buddhist monks who were walking past a river. A man was drowning in the river and screaming for help. One monk said to the other: “Hey, jump in and save him! I can't swim.” The other shrugged. “It's his karma,” he said nonchalantly. “Let him drown.” And they both walked on. “You see?” Joe said righteously. “Don't tell me it's not a selfish path!”

I was stunned; you see, I'd fallen passionately in love with Eastern mysticism in my teens, and, as I kept studying, practicing and contemplating the great truths, my affair was growing more intense and powerful. “No,” I said to Joe, “according to the true teachings, this is not how true renunciates would behave. Your Communist friend was either spinning a yarn to lead you away from deeper truth, or he'd been spun a yarn himself, which, prior to investigation, he was happily regurgitating on to you.”

Joe looked at me curiously. “What would your version of the same story be like, Mira?”

“Two monks are passing a river when they see a drowning man screaming for help,” I said. “One says to the other, “Jump in right away and save him! I can't swim!” Without giving it a second thought, the second monk dives into the water and rescues the man, who thanks him profusely. He explains that he got a terrible cramp while swimming and that he was actually a champion swimmer. The monks resume their serene journey to their monastery. “Funny, that

man's karma, eh?" one says to the other. "To be a strong swimmer, and then to almost drown because of a cramp! Fellow must have done something in the past to have gotten into that mess. Good thing we were passing by right then. Definitely it was our karma to save him." His friend shrugs and smiles. "Yes," he agrees. "Karma on both ends of the stick. That's how this world spins."

Why did I think of Joe and his strange notions of mysticism? Because, last evening a friend and I were discussing social media and she mentioned that she now was very careful whom she "friended"—there were too many trolls out there, she said darkly, and one had to be exceedingly careful.

I explained that, as an indie writer (from what I hear, traditionally published writers are in more or less the same boat), I had had no choice but to dive into social media. I told her how recently a "friend" had "unfriended" me because she was pro-Israel and objected to my anti-Zionist shares. I had explained to her that regardless of who was committing a crime against humanity—even if my own family or close friends were involved—I would stand against it. My philosophy is Advaita-Vedanta, which in simple essence reveals to the committed seeker that we are all One. How could a follower of Advaita also be racist? I demanded.

My friend said: why do you get involved in stuff like that, Mira? Gaza isn't your business. You are here to become enlightened. Why bother with worldly matters?

Oh, I thought, here we go again: another good person who has absorbed the ancient teachings in the wrong way. I told her about the Two Truths, or the concept of Absolute and Relative Reality. (Check out this post if you like: *Two Great Truths of Absolute & Relative Reality*). Each of us is the Divine in human flesh, I explained, just as my own *gurus* had explained to me, and while embodied, each of us straddles both Absolute and Relative. If we choose to enter the inner path, we have all the more reason to show dynamic compassion to those who are suffering—just so long as our activism does not cause us to lose sight of our own primary goal, which is permanent freedom from desire and fear (which is Ramana Maharshi's simple definition of the state of enlightenment). I watched conflicting expressions cross her mobile face. "If your mother, sister or best friend was being bombed to hell in Gaza," I asked, "would you still consider your interference there a "worldly matter"?"

She shook her head thoughtfully. Then she told me that during a vacation in Rishikesh, she'd encountered a wild so-called sadhu who claimed to worship Goddess Kali but who nevertheless regularly beat up his young wife. The traumatized woman was imprisoned in a dirty tent for most of the day—lest people saw her battered state. On the pretext of taking her to the hospital to treat a persistent cold, my friend managed to get the woman out of the tent. But the husband decided to accompany them; en route to the hospital in an auto-rickshaw (local taxi), he realized my friend was planning to steal his victim away; so, when the rickshaw stopped at a traffic intersection, he grabbed hold of his wife, jumped out and dragged her away.

Helpless to do more since she was heading back to Europe the next day, my friend called the people who had offered to care for the battered woman and begged them to rescue her as soon as possible. It was too painful for her to further investigate further. "You're right," she said.

“People warned me not to get involved, but I could not bear to see that woman suffering. I failed to rescue her, and most likely he bashed her up even more afterwards. Still, I did what I had to do.”

I then told her about how, as a teenager, I had diverted a drunk by screaming at him when he was about to kill his pregnant wife. The drunk had swung around and hit me on the jaw, which hurt like hell—but, by diverting his attention, I managed to save the woman and her unborn child. Oddly enough she never thanked me for it. The police were called, and, as he was dragged off to jail, she shouted that he was innocent and really loved her. That’s when it struck me with terrible force that some women are so deeply conditioned to believe they are nothing without a man that they would rather die at his hands than live without him.

On and on we went, swapping stories about how we had “interfered” in worldly matters, and mostly failed in achieving the results for which we had hoped. I ended by telling her that Eckhart Tolle’s advice was perfect for me: to straddle both realms (Absolute and Relative), and she agreed.

It still shocks me when a genuine seeker believes that s/he should not help those who are suffering. Yes, according to Eastern sages, the relative world is illusion. It is not “real” as defined by Advaita-Vedanta, where the word means “that which is permanent and lasting.” My teachers have convinced me that life is nothing but an endless stream of karmic consequences, individual and collective, unfurling at a rapid speed and deceiving us into believing it is all real—just as a movie, made up of tens of thousands of single shots rolls on, gives us the impression of a continuous reality. And yet we are a part of this relative dream and its happenings are valid as long as we are attached to body and mind.

For those seriously walking the inner path, it is critical first to distinguish between what is “real” and what is “unreal”—in other words, the Dreamer must learn how to step out of the Dream; but when things go drastically wrong in the dream, s/he must also learn how to step back in and play his or her role as a force for justice and peace. As Nisargadatta Maharaj says, there is nothing wrong with the dream; what is wrong is that we like some parts of it and not others.

