



November 2001 Contemplation Theme

Bittersweet

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., E-RYT 500

The holiday season is upon us. At the end of every year, we turn to celebrations of gratitude, light and God's grace, even in the echo of recent tragedies and in the midst of continuing turmoil. Can we laugh and feast when so many are still suffering? How can we celebrate when so many have died?

A celestial being brought together Confucius, Buddha and Shankaracharya for a taste test. He served a clear liquid containing the essence of the world to each in turn. Buddha took a sip, puckered up and frowned. He said, "This cup is bitter. All life is suffering. The world is full of pain." Confucius sipped from the same cup and said, "How sweet this tastes! The world is an amazing interplay of dynamics that play out through human relationships and in society. Life is wonderful." Then it was the yogi's turn. Shankaracharya sipped and smiled, saying, "You are both right. The world is full of pain and it is wonderful. This cup is bittersweet — the best of all tastes!"

Yoga recognizes both light and shadow as manifestations of the one Reality. Neither one is inherently better than the other. We live in what yoga calls the pairs of opposites: pleasure-pain, happy-sad, good-bad, right-wrong, etc. Recognize your own tendency to bounce back and forth between the pairs of opposites. While the pairs are real, they are not the whole story. You must look deeper and discover the source within yourself.

If you take on the pain of others, you fall into what I call the "Bodhisattva Trap." Some sects of Buddhism give initiation only after you have taken the bodhisattva vow: that you will not allow yourself to become enlightened until everyone in the world is there. It is a deeply compassionate vow. The most well known of those who have taken it is the Dalai Lama, who takes birth again and again to help shepherd us into our own divinity.

This vow is often misunderstood. To be compassionate does not mean you should be in pain. Helping others does not depend on you feeling their pain. That is the trap that many got caught in after September 11, 2001. "Since others are in pain, I must be in pain, too." No. You can and you must be in a better state than the ones you want to help. You must be in an expanded and exalted inner state in order to help others reach their own.

To avoid the Bodhisattva Trap, it is easy to go too far the other way. The "Hedonist Trap" awaits. Many are now falling into this one, "Forget others' pain by indulging in my desires." You can distract yourself from your own pain as well as from seeing and knowing what is going on in the world. You can do yoga to forget that so many were killed, especially if you didn't know any of them personally. It is easy to ignore that the American military has moved into high gear on the other side of the globe. This is a way of being unconsciousness in a very sophisticated form.

Find the middle road. Avoid both the Bodhisattva Trap and the Hedonist Trap. In the midst of death, celebrate life. In the midst of pain, give thanks for your blessings. In the midst of war, gather together for a reunion with your loved ones, for a few hours or a few days. It makes it all more precious, somehow. Life is bittersweet. It always has been. Know and live it all in fullness, as living yoga.

Of all the chocolates, the bittersweet is the best. Baker's chocolate is too bitter to eat. Milk chocolate is sometimes sappy-sweet. You eat piece after piece but you're never satisfied. One small piece of bittersweet chocolate gives a multilayered satisfaction that lasts for a long time. May your holidays be truly holy-days..

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". Above the signature, there is a small heart symbol containing the number "31".

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