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## KA-SENSEI'S LOVE-BITE



“*Ka ga imasu!*” I complained, as the monk led me into a sparsely decorated 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.\* 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 a whine.

There are many kinds of mosquitoes in Japan, including tiny, barley audible ones, long spindly buggers who stab through your jeans, and pretty black and white stripy ones. This one was a particularly loud species, a veritable helicopter of a parasite. I could hear her† 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 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 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 had given me one anyway, but I wasn’t up for it, and I directed my focus towards the wall in the normal Soto manner.

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\* The noise of a footstep. Japanese has great onomatopoeia.

† Note: only pregnant females bite.

Since that first session, 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 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 her proboscis 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 sacrificed in Mexico at the climax of a magickal rite was taking revenge, sending her incarnate sister to interrupt my attempts at bliss. 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.* Buzz 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, feeding at the one spot where I could squash her with a tiny adjustment of the mudra (because 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 life, but I was no Buddhist. The fourth noble truth is to meditate upon the paths, and this parasite was making this difficult. 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 debated in the temple as the mosquito leisurely supped... *teku teku teku...* and supped... *teku teku teku.* I waited for the monk to pause, and destroyed her with my Shaolin Buddha finger. *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 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 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 a 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, most of them 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. That Tibetan was a great teacher, but my monk was not. I suspect he broke with tradition and gave me the *koan* because it made his job easier: 'just go away and think about this until you are enlightened.'

Everyone hates mosquitoes, but mosquitoes love us. A bus-queue is a barbeque for them. 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. 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 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, or

you would scratch all day. The bite of the mosquito holds the secret of mind over matter. It reminds us that life runs smoother when the 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 strive for comfort, 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 per minute, but it protected us from ourselves for millennia. Attempts to develop the rainforests had always been doomed to feverish failure, until the stakes were upped with World War Two, and battle commenced in the blood streams of soldiers. Two principle weapons were developed against malaria, the prophylactic Chloroquine, and DDT, the first pesticide. After the war a chemically enhanced Bigfoot was unleashed, cutting highways to mine, to farm, to log and to settle, and by 1980 half of the Nepalese forest was gone.<sup>235</sup> By 1962, one percent of the Brazilian Amazon had been cleared, and today twenty percent is lost.<sup>236</sup> The WHO Global Malaria Eradication Programme began in 1955, speeding up the destruction.



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Rainforests shelter half of the species on the planet; we breathe the oxygen they produce. 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 food chain. It was banned in the US in 1972, by which time the bald eagle, the symbol of the states, had dwindled to 500 individuals throughout the continent. Today malaria kills more than ever before, and drug resistance is spreading, but humanity, growing at eighty million per year, is a far more serious 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... or is it? 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.

The idea that we might be able to make sense of the world is very recent, quite erroneous, and thoroughly catastrophic. An early example of short-sighted meddling was when American rude mechanicals eager for a touch of class decided to import birds mentioned by Shakespeare. The sweet song of the English Starling was first heard in New York in 1890, and today it destroys crops and outcompetes indigenous species throughout the continent. In 1935, an Australian imported cane toads, reasoning quite logically that they would control a pest, the cane beetle. He was absolutely right, but he hadn't factored the rest of the ecosystem into his calculations. They feasted on a wide range of insects and rapidly swelled into a plague which is advancing across Australia, putting competitors on the endangered list, killing predators with toxic secretions, and spreading salmonella.<sup>237</sup> Other Australian logicians introduced the common starling and the mosquitofish to control pests, the red fox for game, and various ornamental plants; these newcomers have driven native species to extinction. A shortsighted Brit decided to cultivate Nile Perch in Lake Victoria in the 1950s, and by 1980 it had taken over eighty percent of the lake's biomass and wiped out over a hundred fish species.<sup>238</sup> In 1990, the African killer bee was introduced to Texas to boost honey production; it hybridised with local bees, and the highly aggressive result is presently advancing north. Surely you must be deranged to deliberately introduce killer bees to your country.

If hybrid killer bees sound scary, just wait for the biotech biosphere. Biochemists have turned their cataracts towards the genetic code, confident that the spread of their creations can be prevented, forgetting that plants are essentially well evolved DNA-dispersal machines. Engineered grass and other species have already escaped to compete and hybridise in the wild,<sup>239</sup> <sup>240</sup> and transgenic ingredients compete on supermarket shelves, but how much do we actually know about genetics?

The GENOME project investigates only the DNA sections called 'sense'. The other ninety percent is called 'nonsense' because it doesn't mean anything to biochemists. They assume its role is purely structural. We are left with a parts list coding for proteins, but no instruction manual. We have very little idea how the proteins are put together, or how the order of expression changes in such a precise and responsive manner, but scientists feel confident enough to fiddle with the code. Is this *The Blind Watchmaker* or the blind biochemist?

The genetic screen is already filtering out foetuses with thalassaemia and Down's syndrome, and an argument was raised over a deaf foetus.\*<sup>241</sup> Who is next to find that their life means nothing? There might be no more retarded people to see through dry dust of etiquette one day, no more autistics with Buddha-like intensity of concentration. I used to teach a special needs class, but they were the real teachers, natural, impulsive, friendly, and happy; the exact opposite of normal Japanese teenagers. Could society be rationalised at the embryonic stage if a government decided it was for the best?

Rationalism has been rationalising society since the seventeenth century, when various groups which did not meet the standards of the Age of Reason began to be incarcerated, including paupers, vagrants, outlaws, and the insane. Before this, the village idiot, for whom meaning was quite different, was often considered closer to God, and there was a rich tradition of holy madmen. "Raiseth thou a cry against madness? By thy life, thou shalt have need of it" warned *The Talmud*,<sup>242</sup> and the merry madness continued into *Corinthians*, where "the foolishness of God is wiser than men".<sup>243</sup> St. Andreas drank from puddles and slept naked outside with the dogs, St. Sabas spent the day in a dungheap, St. Simeon threw peanuts at the church congregation and dragged a dead dog around.<sup>244</sup> <sup>245</sup> Even St. Francis sometimes preached in his birthday suit.

Patients begin conversations with my friend who works on a psychiatric ward with lines like - "you know, time doesn't exist." And they are right. Neurotics are often, as William James noted, intelligent, obsessive pattern-seekers, thinking outside the normal assumptions. "If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of requisite receptivity."<sup>246</sup> My beloved and serially sectioned granny used to take me on her knee and tell me all about the races on other planets, what they were like, what they produced and traded, and the messages they send us. My parents weren't very happy about it, but my first Fisher Price alternative cosmology provided protection from the heavy shades of the rational universe that teachers, newsreaders, and other right-thinking people were peddling.

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\* There are other ways to treat Down's Syndrome. I know of one girl who became a theatre director after sessions of the Metamorphic Technique.

The label of insanity depends entirely on where one draws one's lines, and research reveals that even professional psychiatrists are dismal at applying it. All eight institutions targeted in an investigation across the US admitted university students doing nothing abnormal except claiming to hear the word 'thud'. They were incarcerated for an average of three weeks, despite saying that the thud had gone. Another hospital challenged the professor to send more their way. The professor agreed and announced the month, but sent none. The hospital erroneously declared twenty percent of 193 of genuine applicants that month to be frauds.<sup>247</sup> Psychiatrists concluded that the problem was human error, and designed questionnaires to diagnose disorders, which detected mental disorders in over fifty percent of normal Americans.<sup>248</sup>

Mental disorders, psychedelic experiences, and other excursions from the bounds of normality are very rarely dangerous to anything except the status quo. Bizarre ideas and compulsions question our assumptions regarding reality, and that is why they are policed. According to R. D. Laing:

The statesmen of the world who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous, and far more estranged from 'reality' than many of the people on whom the label 'psychotic' is affixed.<sup>249</sup>

But statesmen are not the only threats, and neither are killer bees, nor the honey-monsters breeding them. Short-sighted rationalists carve up the world like a gang of necrophiliacs sawing up a corpse, each having his wicked way with a different hunk of flesh. Physicists create technology to generate nuclear waste for their great-grandchildren. Businessmen large and small suck with all their might on the breasts of the goddess, oblivious to her pain, pulping ancient Tasmanian forests for Japanese serviettes, battering and frying Atlantic cod to the edge of extinction, calling the Lake Victoria catastrophe a success, because it meant that some people became rich selling perch. There is, however, comedy amidst the tragedy. According to one professor of Business Administration, we have "the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever growing population for the next seven billion years." Obviously this is a man used to doing large sums, but billions of years mean something different to billions of dollars.<sup>250</sup>

Meaning morphs as the picture unfolds, but meanies doctor 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.\* 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

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\* In 'Neuro-apocalypse' we will explore the brain, and discuss how what we see is tinted, what we notice is skewed, and what we remember is weighted.

